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Before You Read...

Hello, HELLO, readers! Welcome and/or welcome BACK!

I'm going to try to keep this short, but I figured that a little intro might be necessary for this new addition to my fanfiction series! Well... I suppose that you could call it an addition!

After I finished "Warriors #6: A Kittypet's Destiny" a couple of months ago, I IMMEDIATELY wanted to get started on SOMETHING again, so I came up with the idea for these bonus scenes. And for these, I took inspiration from the bonus scenes that the Erins do in the canon books, where they add a couple of chapters at the end of some of their book of some neat, exclusive scene from the series!

I thought that it would be so, so FUN to do something similar - special, exclusive scenes taking place before, during (events in the series that were maybe BRIEFLY touched on or addressed), or even a bit AFTER the events of my series! You all may get to spend some time with characters you already know very well, and you may get to know some fairly new ones!

AND BY THE WAY, IF YOU HAVEN'T READ MY FANFICTION SERIES, YOU MAY WANT TO NOT READ THIS TO AVOID IMMENSE SPOILERS AND CONFUSION

I had originally planned just to do one bonus scene per book that I had, but I quickly realized that I wanted to do more than six, so here you go! An entire BOOK of them in the making, and I REALLY hope that you all enjoy!

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345

The First Hunt

[image]

Read on to witness Lilypaw's first hunting trip after joining ThunderClan, and the first of many with a certain unlikely friend...

Lilypaw's POV

Chapter 1

"Rise and shine, sleepy-mouse!"

What in the name of...?

My eyelids immediately flew open at the voice that had stolen me from sleep. And I felt as if I was still asleep when I didn't open my eyes to find myself in a cat bed, in a kitchen... in a house.

Instead, I was lying in a neatly-woven moss nest, in the apprentices den, *in ThunderClan's camp... in the forest, holy heck!* The entirely of yesterday had felt like a dream – leaving my housefolk and their nest, making my way into the forest, being found by a patrol of wild cats, and then joining them and receiving an apprentice name - so no wonder it had taken me a moment to even process where I was.

My name is Lilypaw now! I reminded myself as I stirred in my moss nest, shifting so that I was lying on my back. I nearly had to suppress an excited squeal, and I felt my heat welling up with so many wonderful feelings. *And I'm a ThunderClan cat.*

My eyes then slowly widened as I slowly noticed the pale, purple and pink light that was leaking through the woven brambles. *And Lilypaw the ThunderClan cat has just been woken up incredibly early!*

Suddenly significantly more alert and awake, I turned so that I could take a glance at the den entrance, hoping to see who had

decided to wake me up at dawn my first full day in a Clan.

And sure enough, I immediately recognized the taller, muscular figure standing before me. *I could never forget those piercing blue eyes from yesterday...* "Thornclaw?" I whispered, rolling over so that I was now on my belly, and letting out a yawn.

My grogginess then completely faded away for a second time, being replaced by sheer excitement as I quickly realized why the golden brown tabby tom was here. After all, I remembered our first encounter from the day before *very* clearly.

I finally stood up, taking a step closer to Thornclaw and trying to keep my tail from twitching back and forth. "Is it time for hunting already?" I then asked, flicking my tail towards the small rays of light leaking from the den's roof. "My goodness, it's so early!" *You really meant sunrise when you asked to hunt at sunrise, didn't you?*

I then heard Thornclaw sniff, and as he walked deeper into the den, away from the shadows, he revealed his narrow-eyed, smug expression. "Exactly," he muttered.

Although I was well-awake now, I couldn't help but let out another yawn after a small purr of amusement. "Wow..." I then breathed, taking another glance around the den and staring wide-eyed at all of the other sleeping figures surrounding us. "Even when all of the other apprentices are still asleep?"

I looked back at Thornclaw to find him looking back at me with the same expression, except that now, he'd raised a single eyebrow. "They aren't going to be too far behind you," he replied to me, giving me a small flick on the ear with his tail.

Then, without waiting for my reply, he turned and began to leave the den. But he only paused after a moment and looked back at me, his pale blue eyes glinting with humor. "And anyway, if you really want to be a Clan cat, you're going to have to learn that you can't sleep in through sunhigh every morning."

I couldn't help but let out a shocked gasp. "Oh my gosh, I didn't-" I then quickly cut myself off, realizing that the golden brown tabby

warrior was right, whether his comment had been a joke or not. *Warriors don't have time to sleep! Not me, at least! Not when there's so much to see here... so much to learn!*

I could see Thornclaw's whiskers twitching out of the corner of my eye as I shook out my fur, lifted up my chin, and then proceeded to give him a single sharp nod. "Okay!" I meowed cheerfully, but quietly as I ran up to stand just behind Thornclaw. "Let's go, then!"

Thornclaw was still looking back at me, his gaze full of a surprising amount of warmth. Then, with my words, he let out and amused sniff and beckoned me forward with his tail. "Alright," he purred softly. "Come on, Lilypaw."

Then, as the warrior began to lead me out of the den, I followed very excitedly right behind him. And while we passed through the almost eerie-looking ThunderClan camp that felt so strange and unfamiliar, but comforting at the same time, I found that my eyes couldn't leave the golden brown tabby tom in front of me - the golden brown tabby tom that I found just as interesting and intriguing as I had when we'd first met yesterday.

Thornclaw had been one of the last cats I'd met in ThunderClan just the day before, but our encounter would have been just as crystal clear even if I'd met him first, or even days before. Luckily not too similarly to some of my new Clanmates, he'd initially seemed very reluctant to welcome in an outsider like me.

But it only seemed to have taken him a moment to open up a bit more, to my excitement and relief. And by the end of the encounter, he actually gave me a warm welcome, seeming to genuinely believe all of the enthusiastic words I'd given him about how thrilled I was to be in a Clan. He'd even asked me if I'd wanted to hunt with him at sunrise. *Hence, why I'm awake with him at sunrise!* I thought, shaking my head slowly as I continued to stare back at Thornclaw. *But I suppose that I'm not complaining at all.*

There was clearly more to this tom, and more than he was originally willing to show, than what met the eye. *And even though he seems more open-minded to me being here, he's clearly still trying to test me...* I realized, my eyes narrowing as I smirked. *He wants me to*

prove myself to him, and I'm going to.

I then abruptly stopped in my tracks. *Just as soon as I take a little stretch and yawn again.*

Thornclaw soon noticed that I had stopped, and simply watched with narrowed eyes as I stretched out my forepaws and let my jaws widen into another yawn. "Hm, too tired to hunt?"

There was that testing again – I could read it through Thornclaw so easily already.

So, I quickly stood back up, shaking my head enthusiastically. "Nope!" I answered before shaking out my fur. "I'm just fine!"

I then ran forward so that I was almost walking beside the tabby tom. *If you can take little teasing jabs at me, I'm going to have a go at taking them at you!* "Well, what about you, you tough, early-rising warrior?" I purred quietly as he led me through the ThunderClan camp entrance. "Aren't you tired at all from having to get up this early?"

I looked back at Thornclaw to see him giving me a small, sheepish shrug. "Well, to be honest," he began to reply, "this isn't exactly new for me."

I couldn't help but widen my eyes with amazement as we then made our way into the forest and began to walk through the trees side by side. "No way!" I breathed. "Really? You've gotten up this early more than once?"

"I like to when I can," Thornclaw answered, his whiskers beginning to twitch once again, as if he were amused by my surprise. "Brambleclaw picks me for the dawn patrol quite often..."

I then couldn't help but purr as he seemed to lift up his chin with pride. "But even when he doesn't, I like to be on call, and be prepared for any of my Clanmates' needs that must be tended to."

I actually felt my heart lifting with the tom's words, and I found that I was staring back at him with immense admiration hearing about his dedication to his Clan. "That's... that's so thoughtful of

you," I meowed warmly. "Does it always feel worth it to get up that early for your Clanmates?"

Thornclaw nodded, his eyes continuing to glow with pride. "No doubt about it," he answered. I then raised my eyebrows as he seemed to hesitate for a moment before leaning in towards me, his muzzle close to my ear. "And I have to admit that getting first pick of the fresh-kill pile isn't too bad, either."

I burst into laughter at those words. "I'm sure that's infinitely worth it!" I purred, then letting out a sigh. "But goodness, it's sure going to take me a while to get used to getting up with the sun like this. How do you manage it?"

I raised my eyebrows with intrigue once again as Thornclaw let out a snort, flashing me a half-exasperated, half-amused look. "Oh, when I was an apprentice, Mousefur would have me up earlier than this," he breathed, shaking his head slowly. "Sometimes it felt like she watched for moonhigh, waited a few moments, and then ran back to the apprentices den to wake me up just heartbeats after I'd gone to sleep!"

I continued to purr with amusement as Thornclaw told his story. "Oh, wow, what a mentor she was..." the tabby tom then murmured, his eyes wide. "Sometimes I'm not sure how I got through my apprenticeship in one piece!"

I flicked my ears, sniffing. "Oh, dear... that's reassuring!" I joked, causing Thornclaw to actually purr with amusement as well. I then gave the tom a light nudge, and I was actually surprised that I felt comfortable enough to even give the gesture. "And even though she clearly did something right in your apprenticeship, that totally seems like a Mousefur move."

With my words, Thornclaw glanced at the ground shyly for just a moment. "Ah, well..." He then looked back up at me, looking amused and confused at the same time. "But how can you tell that that would be a Mousefur move? You only met her yesterday!"

I simply gave the tom a sharp nod. "Precisely."

Thornclaw then let out another purr of amusement. "I have to say, that doesn't surprise me one bit," he meowed, his voice full of laughter.

I then was surprised yet again as he glanced down at the ground once more, then looking back up at me to reveal shy, yet mischievous and teasing eyes. "So..." he began hesitantly. "Was she the cat that stuck out to you most yesterday, then?"

Interesting... not bad at all, but interesting...

As I felt my stomach begin to flutter – not for the first time that morning, might I add – I narrowed my eyes back at Thornclaw. "Hm, who's asking?" I purred, tilting my head to the side. "The tom that threw a hissy-fit as soon as soon as he laid eyes on me?"

I continued to purr with amusement as I watched Thornclaw let out a huff and roll his eyes – definitely not a shocking response, considering I was teasing him about his initial behavior towards me the day before. "Oh, please!" he muttered. "Hissy-fit is a strong word."

"Ah, so you admit that it was some form of a hissy-fit, just on a different level!" I continued to tease, lightly touching the tip of my tail to Thornclaw's shoulder.

Although the golden brown tabby tom's gaze was sharp as he looked back at me, the amusement that was also there was clear. "Hey, even if there was a so-called 'hissy-fit', as you so *immaturely* like to call it, it didn't last long, did it?"

I looked away from Thornclaw and gave a small shrug. "Long enough to where I could call it a hissy-fit."

"Great StarClan," Thornclaw breathed, and I looked back towards him to see him rolling his pale blue eyes once again.

But then, they seemed to slowly wash over with guilt. "But... I suppose that I've been a bit tough on you, haven't I?"

I immediately flashed the tom a reassuring look, not wanting him to feel even one single twinge of shame. Yes, his initial hostility threw

me off at first, but he has all the right to be wary of random cats that his Clanmates bring in from the forest, and even though his behavior had already changed significantly since then, I understood it completely. "Hey, it's okay! Really," I tried to meow comfortingly to Thornclaw, putting the tip of my tail on his shoulder and holding his gaze. "Look at you now – you're taking me out on my first hunting trip, and you barely know me!"

Thornclaw's eyes seemed to be glowing with genuine appreciation and warmth as he looked back at me. At least, for the one moment he was able to look back at me. It was only a couple of heartbeats before his eyes flitted back towards the ground. "Ha, I suppose so," he murmured. "But... I mean..."

He then slowly raised his head to meet my gaze again, his gaze revealing wariness. "I..." he then hesitantly went on. "I hope that that can change?"

I felt my stomach flipping upside down once more, and I found that my heart's beating pace began to quicken. "Oh, yeah?" I nearly whispered. I then found that I was comfortable enough to take a step to my side, closer to Thornclaw. "Are you this kind to every cat that you first meet?"

The tom flashed me another teasing look. "Hm, it depends," he murmured, narrowing his eyes. "Maybe I was just annoyed to death by all of your kindness, and I had to give into you."

I let out a snort. "Hm... I can't tell if that was supposed to be a compliment or not," I purred in reply. And then, after the two of us shared another purr of amusement, I held Thornclaw's gaze once again and meowed more softly, "Either way, I really, really appreciate the gesture."

This time, Thornclaw didn't look away, and he meowed to me just as softly, "Of course."

And for yet another moment, we kept our gazes right where they were, and I found that there wasn't the least bit of tension left between our two pairs of eyes anymore.

I mean, that had been the case this entire morning, I suppose. The latter part of our conversation yesterday really had set things up for how things were going to go this morning. *The conversation has felt so comfortable... it's as if I've been speaking to a cat I've known for moons, and yet...* I then shook my head, so softly that I'm sure Thornclaw wouldn't notice. *Goodness, there really is way, way more to this cat than what I first saw of him yesterday, and I continue to be amazed by it.*

Then, after a few heartbeats, I shyly looked away from Thornclaw's alluring blue eyes. And as I heard Thornclaw let out a purr, my heart continued to fill with warmth as I continued to realize just how excited for this hunting trip I was.

I then looked back up at Thornclaw, my pawsteps light as we continued to make our way through the forest. "So, where are we going to hunt?" I asked eagerly.

Thornclaw twitched his whiskers back at me. "We're hunting here in the forest," he purred. "What, do you think that we just sit here and wait for the prey to leap into our jaws?"

"Well, no..." I admitted. "But that'd be neat, wouldn't it?"

The tabby tom purred with amusement at my words. "Neat, and... unfortunately only fantasy out here in the forest."

I nodded in understanding with those words, already knowing very well that being a wild cat meant that I couldn't exactly get everything I wanted... when I wanted – food, drink, it was now all up to me to obtain it. "Well, it will take some getting used to for sure, but that's okay!" I reassured myself as much as Thornclaw.

I then gave the tom another nudge. "You're going to help me learn, right?"

I then narrowed my eyes with confusion as Thornclaw seemed to hesitate. "Well, I'm certainly going to *try*, but..."

I tilted my head to the side. "But what?"

"Well..."

"What? I pressed to Thornclaw, my voice full of laughter.

Thornclaw then finally shrugged after leaving me hanging for a few heartbeats, letting his gaze flit around the forest. "Well, let's put it this way," he began, "You can try and get a hedgehog to fly, but you very well know that it's probably not going to happen."

I let out a gasp, pretending to be immensely offended. "Hey!"

Thornclaw's gaze immediately warmed, and he let out yet another purr as he flicked my ear with his tail. "I'm kidding," he reassured me. "You're right – it will take some getting used to, but you're going to be fine. All it takes is following my directions, and keeping in mind that you need to be aware of everything around you."

He then took one large glance around the forest, giving a flick of his tail to the trees surrounding us. "And in a forest, that's quite a bit!"

"I don't disagree with you there!" I purred, following the tom's pale blue gaze to look up at the trees in awe. *Wow...* "It's all absolutely beautiful, though," I then breathed. "Goodness, I could sit here and stare up at the trees for moons and moons! I've never gotten to see so many at once..."

Thornclaw seemed genuinely surprised by my words, giving a single flick of his ears. "Really?" he inquired, his eyes glowing with interest. "Was the view really so terrible at your Twoleg nest?"

I gave the tom yet another light nudge. "Well, I'm sure you'd think so!" And after the tom let out a snort, I gave him my genuine answer. "And... I suppose that it could have been a lot worse. My yard was pretty, and it had bright green, soft grass with so many beautiful flowers, but..."

I then let out a sigh as I fell deep into memories. "Nothing beat the view from the top of my fence," I went on, then letting out a sniff as I looked back at Thornclaw. "Well, nothing except actually being beyond the fence!"

Although everything I was talking about was surely foreign to Thornclaw, I was surprised to see that he genuinely seemed to be

listening, his eyes sparkling as he looked back at me. *Just as they did when looked at me yesterday...* "I see," he replied. "Is being beyond the fence everything you imagined it would be?"

I shook my head slowly in amazement, my words being as true as anything I'd ever said in my life. "It's already so much better," I whispered before letting out another sigh, sitting down and looking back up at the trees. "You're so lucky, Thornclaw, getting to be *born* in a place like this."

Thornclaw walked up to sit next to me. "I have to admit, there's nothing like it," he whispered back to me. He then tried to meet my gaze. "But hey, better late than never, right?"

Before I could even reply to Thornclaw, I raised my eyebrows in surprise as I watched him flick his ears. "Great StarClan, you know what else is late?" he then murmured, his eyes wide with amazement.

I almost wanted to knead my paws in anticipation. "What?"

"Well... we're here in the forest so that you can learn how to hunt..." Thornclaw answered, his voice full of laughter as he shook his head. "But we haven't even done any hunting yet!"

I let out a gasp, taking a glance up at the sky to see that dawn was already well past, and the sun was peaking out from the trees already. *Gee, I didn't even realize...* I thought. *We've just been talking, and it's been so... so great; I'd almost forgotten about hunting!*

"Oh my goodness, we haven't!" I then exclaimed. "So much for getting up early, huh?"

To my surprise, Thornclaw didn't seem phased by the revelation he'd just made, and he simply gave a nonchalant shrug. "Hm, oh well," he murmured.

My heart then nearly skipped a beat as our gazes locked once again, and Thornclaw murmured hesitantly, "I wouldn't say that the time was wasted at all. Would you?"

I stared warmly back at him, so happy that he was echoing my own

thoughts. "You were thinking that too?" I purred in reply. "Thank StarClan."

Once again, it seemed almost impossible to look anywhere else until finally Thornclaw's shimmering eyes seemed to flash with surprise, and I couldn't help but purr as I watched him then shut them, shake his head quickly, and clear his throat. "Great. Yes... t-that's great..." he then stammered as he straightened himself up. "But yes, anyway – hunting..."

I couldn't help but continue to look warmly back at him as he led me to the nearby clearing. "Yes," I whispered. "Hunting."

Chapter 2

Once we had arrived to the place ThunderClan had deemed the "training hollow", Thornclaw proceeded to teach me all of the rules of hunting, and I had listened with incredible interest, and so much fear and excitement had risen inside of me all at once as he listed off all of the different things a hunter had to watch out for – the distance you were from the prey, whether or not you're facing the wind, watching for leaves and sticks that might make noises when you step on them...

And after Thornclaw gave me some reassurance that all of that would become second nature, he then began to teach me the hunter's crouch. And just as he had told me to do earlier, I tried to follow every single direction that he gave me, making sure that I didn't miss anything at all.

And gee, it took some explaining and demonstration, alright, but eventually...

I got very close.

And luckily Thornclaw seemed to be thinking the same thing as he stared intently back at me, watching as I attempted to get into the position. "You're almost there," he meowed thoughtfully before padding up to me and setting a paw on my back. "Hold on, don't

move – you're so close."

I then did as I was told, letting him gently lower my haunches. I then looked back up at him to see him giving me a nod of approval. "That's it right there, Lilypaw," he meowed to me, backing away. "If you get into that position to pounce, and you're confident in what you're pursuing, it shouldn't ever fail you."

I gave the golden brown tabby tom a nod, then shifting myself just a bit in order to become acclimated to the strange stance. "Okay..." I murmured, slowly and steadily getting used to it. "Okay!"

I then excitedly stood up, luckily growing a bit more confident in my abilities. "I think I can manage that. Thank you!"

Thornclaw then narrowed his eyes and tilted his head to the side. "Hm, can you?" he murmured, his gaze teasing. "Well, we'll see about that."

I let out a small huff and shook my head slowly, holding back a *mrrow* of laughter. "Why, you..." I purred before proceeding to flick the tom's ear and pad out deeper into the forest. "Oh, I'll *show* you!"

I could hear Thornclaw's purr of amusement behind me as I came to a stop in the middle of the forest, already beginning to apply what the golden brown tabby tom had just taught me moments ago. I lifted my head and gaped my mouth open in an attempt to catch wind of anything close by.

And conveniently enough, just as the wonderful scent of prey had flooded through my nose, I caught sight of a small shrew just a little ways ahead of me. *Holy bricks and sticks, here we go...*

I then had to take a deep breath as I began to creep towards the tiny creature. *Here we go...*

Luckily, I hadn't run into any leaves or small twigs along the way by the time I lowered down into a crouch, but nevertheless, I felt just as discombobulated and terrified as I would be if everything had gone wrong.

And I could feel Thornclaw's gaze burning into me as I finally

decided to pounce, using all of my strength in my back legs to leap forward.

But I felt my heart immediately sink as I already could deduce that I'd fallen short.

And sure enough, I plopped back onto the ground just about a tail-length in front of the shrew, and all I could do was watch as it let out an alarmed squeak and pelted from sight. *Gosh-darn it!*

"Aw, shoot!" I sighed, rolling onto my back and staring up at the sunlight breaking through the leaves above me. "I think I came out worser-off than the shrew, and that's not what's supposed to happen."

Thornclaw quickly ran over to me and nosed me up. "Hey, that's okay," he encouraged me, watching me as I got back up onto my paws. "Honestly, I think that you did very well for your first try. I could see it in your eyes – you were just doubting yourself, that's all."

He then flicked my ears with his tail, his gaze reassuring. "And you don't need to be."

My ears grew hot with those words, and I had to look away for a moment. "Aw, thank you," I purred, my heart already welling up with a new hope. Thornclaw was right, and I was honestly surprised that he'd been able to read me so well. "Can I try again?"

Thornclaw gave a nod. "Of course you can," he meowed. And just a moment later, he flicked his ears, and his nose just barely twitched. "And I think you're about to get your opportunity right now..."

I raised my chin and gaped my mouth open, quickly catching what I figured Thornclaw was referring to. "Ah, yes, I am!" I whispered, turning back around towards the trees. "Wish me luck!"

Almost immediately after I had turned around, I could clearly see the small, round body of a mouse sniffing at a leaf next to some brambles.

I closed my eyes for a moment, and then slowly began to slither

towards the creature once again. *You followed Thornclaw's directions, and you're going to be aware of everything around you...*

I then took another, very *quiet* deep breath as I crouched down. *You've got this, Lily. Thornclaw's right – you don't need to doubt yourself.*

I then pushed my back paws off of the ground once again. Go!

I could feel my heart pounding like it never had before as I flew through the air for a moment, even sending a prayer to StarClan, who I now knew to be the Clan's warrior ancestors, before outstretching my front paws.

And my goodness, did I feel more satisfaction than I would've ever thought possible when I felt my claws sink into fur. And I couldn't help but let out an excited gasp as I then slashed across its body, giving the mouse a killing blow.

"Oh my goodness!" I then exclaimed, leaping up to my paws and grabbing my catch to carry in my jaws. I then hopped up and down excitedly as I ran up to meet Thornclaw. "Thornclaw, I did it!" I meowed, that meow then being followed by a squeal. "I actually caught a piece of prey! A piece of prey that one of our Clanmates will be able to *eat!*"

Thornclaw's eyes seemed to reflect the same amount of excitement and pride that I felt. "Yes, you did!" he purred as well. He then gave me a wink. "And as much as it sickens me to admit it, you did it very, very well."

"That's good enough for me!" I replied excitedly, followed by another squeal as I ran up to Thornclaw, not being able to help touching my nose to his as gratitude for the tom welled up inside of me. "Thank you so, so much, Thornclaw. I can't even begin to tell you how much I appreciate you taking the time to do this with me."

I then pulled away, all of my thoughts from the morning beginning to spill out of me. "You've been so kind and patient, and it's been so fun, and..." I then looked up to the sky, and I felt my heart slightly sink as I realized that the sun was now approaching the middle of

the sky; we were going to have to return to camp very soon. *And... for some reason that really disappoints me?*

I then looked back down, letting out a sigh. "Great StarClan, I wish that it wasn't over."

To be honest, I wasn't sure in the slightest how Thornclaw would respond to those words, but I was both shocked and relieved to look up at him and find tender pale blue eyes. "Of course, Lilypaw. It was my pleasure, really, and..." He then gave a small shrug, and my heart began to flutter as I hoped he'd say what I wanted him to say. "I, well... I wish that it wasn't over, either."

And my heart seemed to grow even lighter as I watched his eyes brighten, and he gave a sharp flick of his ears. "But who says that we can't do it again?"

I gasped, taking a step closer to the tom. "Really?" I nearly exclaimed. "You want to do this again?"

"Why not?" Thornclaw meowed warmly, almost seeming amused by my enthusiasm. He then leaned his head in towards me, cocking an eyebrow. "I'd say that it's a must, if you ask me."

I nearly began to knead my paws into the ground. "I couldn't agree more!" I meowed cheerfully, reflecting his same expression. "We clearly have some unfinished business, Thornclaw – you still have *way* more to tell me about your own interesting apprenticeship with Mousefur, and how she made you into the hissy-fit tom that you are today, right?"

Thornclaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter at my words. "Oh, fine! I suppose we can discuss something along those lines," he purred, then giving me a nudge. "And maybe you can tell me some more about what you've always found so interesting about life beyond that fence and that little flower-flitted yard of yours, and the moment that you realized that you were out of your mind for staying there!"

I rolled my eyes, but simultaneously let out a purr. "It's a deal," I concluded. *It already can't get here fast enough!*

I then began to slow down in our travel back to camp, my mouse still in my mouth. "But hey..."

Thornclaw also slowed his pace, looking at me intently. "Yeah?"

"Why wait for another hunting trip?" I asked the golden brown tabby tom, coming to a stop so that I could face him. "It's getting a little later, and I'm getting a bit hungry, so..."

I slowly began to well up with apprehension and nerves with what I was about to say, but nevertheless, I powered through and forced myself to continue. "Maybe we could..." I continued to stammer. "Well, would you maybe want to share a meal with a former kittypet?"

I looked back up at Thornclaw from where I'd glanced at the ground to find that his pale blue eyes were practically glowing as he stared back at me. "Earlier yesterday, likely not..." he admitted. "But now..."

He then briefly touched his nose to my ear. "Well, let's just say that I thought you'd never ask," he meowed softly as he pulled away. And with those words, I was almost too touched to even speak. But luckily, Thornclaw went on. "But that mouse isn't going to be nearly enough for the two of us."

"Oh, yeah?" I questioned, tilting my head once again. "Then what do you suggest we do?"

Thornclaw nodded to the small creature, then taking it in his own jaws. "We can give that to the lovely Mousefur over in the elders den," he replied. "For us, I know of a delicious, plump chaffinch already waiting for us at the fresh-kill pile."

My heart was filled with so much warmth, and I was already so excited about the extra time I'd get to spend with the ThunderClan warrior. This training and hunting trip had seemed to go by in just moments flat, and I had been so happy to hear that Thornclaw didn't want it all to end just as much as I did. "Sounds absolutely perfect," I purred to the tom before proceeding to nudge him with my tail, and letting him lead the way back to my new home.

And Great StarClan, we'd only known each other for about a day, but after our time together this morning, I could already tell that this tom was going to become one of my closest, if not my absolute closest friend in ThunderClan.

She-Cat Next Door

[image]

Read on to see Oreo's journey to find his new home near the lake, as well as his journey of emotions as he meets his new neighbor across the Thunderpath...

Oreo's POV

Chapter 1

"I'm so, so glad that you are staying, Oreo."

A large, throbbing purr was rising in my throat as I stared back at the warm hazel eyes that reflected my own. "Me too," I replied to the she-cat that I had the privilege of calling my own sister. "Which means that I had better see you soon!"

"Count on it," Lilypetal, this said sister of mine meowed, giving me a sharp nod.

As my tail began to lash back and forth with excitement, I opened my mouth in order to give a reply. But I quickly closed it, simply returning Lilypetal's nod. *You darned piece of thistle-fluff! Her Clanmates are waiting for her,* I reminded myself sadly, briefly glancing past my sister towards the three other wild cats watching patiently further down the hill, more hidden by the shadows of the forest's trees.

I then forced myself to finally turn around. *She'll be nearby, Oreo... she'll be nearby! You can power through this...*

"Hey!"

I immediately stopped in my tracks, and turned back around at the sound of my sister's voice. *Well, I suppose that I don't have to for the moment...*

I glanced over my shoulder to see that Lilypetal was excitedly

padding forward, stopping at a place where she was sure that I could hear her. "Maybe I'll bring my kits to meet you soon at your new home!"

With those absolutely fantastic words, I felt my ears perk up and my tail fit in the air. "I've been anxious to meet those little furballs!" I purred back to her. *Although anxious is definitely an understatement!*

I then shifted slightly so that I could lean forward and give Lilypetal a mockingly sharp look, an eyebrow raised. "Don't let me down."

I then had to try extremely hard to push down my tugging feelings of grief and sadness as I watched the brown tabby-and-white pelt of my sister finally turn around and pad away, her lean figure becoming smaller and smaller the deeper that she and her patrol went into the forest.

Good gosh... I thought, forcing myself to stand up and turn around, beginning to travel in the completely opposite direction once again. *No matter how much time Lilypetal and I are given to speak to each other, it never, ever feels like enough!*

It was all still so mind-blowing to me, considering Lilypetal and I had only met a few moons ago, but the realization that we were brother and sister; that we shared blood, had immediately caused us to become so close that we might as well have been littermates together.

And now, the two of us were practically tied-up together by unbreakable cobwebs, and I could definitively speak for both of us when I say that we felt fulfilled by something that we never even realized had been missing in the first place.

But the difficult part of it all was the fact that Lilypetal was a Clan cat, who lived out in the wild, and I was a kittypet who lived in the Twolegplace, and neither of us felt like we could fit in to each other's way of life. But still, knowing that Lilypetal was close to my housefolk's leaf-bare home sometimes gave me the tug to join her, and leave my housefolk behind so that I could be with her all of the time. *Because at the time, not only was Lilypetal in ThunderClan, but...* I then lowered my head, screwing my eyes shut as my heart seemed

to sink. *Mistpelt was also there as well, and I could've gotten to know her even more before...*

I even stopped in my tracks for a moment as I attempted to fight my grief. *Before Lilypetal and I both lost her...*

Lilypetal coming to me with that news had truly been the hardest thing I'd ever had to endure – the second hardest likely being when my old housefolk's dog, Millie, had done her business all over one of my favorite toys.

And around the same time that I had heard the news of my mother's death, I was also picking up many signs that my household were planning on returning to our old home far, very far from the lake, which meant that I'd have to leave Lilypetal and my mother's spirit for a long, long time. I never even let myself face the reality that it'd likely be for forever.

So I had decided to let my housefolk return to our old home on their own, and I ran away, fully committed to finding a new home that was close to my mother and my sister in the Twolegplace nearby. And thank gosh, my attempt to tell Lilypetal herself that had... *somewhat* succeeded when I had found her by accident near the ThunderClan forest.

And by "found"... I mean that she attacked me thinking that I was another cat that had been invading her Clan's territory.

But either way, I had been able to tell Lilypetal my plans, and she had been just as excited and joyed as I had hoped that she would be. *We promised we'd see each other again soon, and we agreed that she'd need to bring her kits to meet me, but still...* I thought, still glancing over my shoulder at the spot that my sister had disappeared. *Gosh, I'm going to miss her so much!*

I then began to slow my pace as I fell into my own thoughts. *Perhaps if I...* I began, my brain beginning to swirl with thoughts of what it would actually be like had I followed my sister and her patrol back into the forest, never to see a house or Twolegs again. Lilypetal had definitely attempted to convince me on more than one occasion since we'd met. *I mean... would it be so bad? Lilypetal*

adjusted to it so easily! And she's there...

It only took me a moment to let out a snort, shake my head quickly, and speed up into a trot. *Yes, it would be terrible. Lilypetal, and feeling Mistpelt's presence would be the only thing to keep me there,* I told myself as the forest and the trees suddenly fell behind me. *This is why you are doing what you are doing, Oreo.*

I then paused for a moment, shaking out my fur as the Twolegplace came into sight. *They're still both just a few pawsteps away, even here,* I told myself excitedly once I had begun to move my paws again. *You're getting the best of both worlds this way.*

I then began to pad alongside the small, smooth stone Thunderpath that ran down the middle of the cluster of houses that loomed over me. *You're in a win-win situation...*

I then narrowed my eyes, beginning to scan my gaze around and focus on each individual structure for at least a few heartbeats as I walked. *Having my catnip and eating it too...*

I then stopped once again. *Well, at least I will be once I actually find a place to live...*

While I had passed by this Twolegplace on the way to Lilypetal's territory, that hadn't been nearly enough to give me an idea of just how ridiculously large this neighborhood was. Each house was fairly spaced out from the other, and they seemed to stretch infinitely on each side, and I could even see some of the twists and turns of the Thunderpath that likely led to even more houses.

I couldn't help but shake my head slowly at this sight. *Right now, there really is no telling as to which of these houses is going to be the right fit for me.*

I then quickly but warily began to walk along the small Thunderpath – one that looked just small enough to fit two monsters on it at the same time – and quickly flitted my hazel eyes about, hoping they'd eventually lie on the home that spoke to me the most. *I'd live in a rugged old shed if it meant that I'd be close to Lilypetal, buuuutt... I suppose that if I have the opportunity to not settle*

for less, I'll take it!

And trying to achieve that was definitely an interesting endeavor. Some houses I immediately avoided if they looked too big, too small, had too many Twolegs, Twoleg kits...

And unfortunately, that included many, many of them.

The sun was already beginning to lower in the sky by the time that I actually found something promising. The house was a decent size – not that it mattered to me – and made of a pale red brick. The front yard looked empty, and the small, single monster that sat silently on the house's driveway indicated that only a couple of Twolegs at the most lived there. *And I just barely have to peer past the house to see the forest ahead!*

I pricked my ears excitedly from where I sat in the front yard, just a few tail-lengths away from the house's front door. *Holy moly, have I finally found where I'm going to live?* I could hardly wait another moment, and began to excitedly trot up to the front door.

But I'd barely taken one pawstep when I paused, letting out a long, disappointed sigh as I heard the loud, obnoxious barking of a dog come from the inside of a structure.

I didn't even need to look for the yapping nuisance that was likely giving me a crazed death stare from one of the windows inside, and I quickly turned around to continue padding along the road. *I've already dealt with a dog once in my life... which is one more time than I would've liked!*

I could still just barely hear the dog's barking by the time that I had made it to the neighboring house – sadly, this one wasn't much better. While the house itself looked perfectly nice, the grass looked tall enough to hide in, Twoleg rubble was thrown all over the place, and this strange, weirdly loud and deep noise was coming from inside.

It was a sort of loud thumping noise - almost like thunder, but it seemed to beat in my own ears and consume my entire mind. And unlike thunder, the thumping noises were almost consistent; each

thump was spaced out equally from the one before and the one after. And over top of the noise, I almost thought that I could recognize a Twoleg's voice, speaking gibberish in time to the strange thumps.

While it was somewhat enticing, I could hardly tolerate it for even a moment, and I quickly moved on as I sniffed with amusement. *Gosh, how crazy is that? I wonder if Lilypetal ever heard anything like that when she was a kittypet?* I thought to myself, perfectly being able to picture the perplexed, disgusted look on my sister's face. *She'd certainly hate it now, that's for sure!*

I told myself that I'd have to pass up a few of the houses ahead if I wanted to completely avoid that noise.

But luckily, once I had turned a corner, I seemed to have arrived at a slightly calmer part of the neighborhood. The houses were just a bit more spaced out, and the evening cicadas and chirping birds from the forest nearby could now be heard.

I nodded to myself as I took in the surroundings, letting out a satisfied grunt. *Now, this is more like it!*

Already having much more faith in the selections of this area, I actually found myself stopping at one of the first houses that had come into my sight as I had rounded the corner – a tall, bright red house. Its front yard was fairly large, with freshly cut grass that was clearly tended to often. Brightly and eclectically colored flowers grew alongside the brick walls, nearly towering over the steps that led to the structure's front door.

The back half of the house was enclosed by a white picket fence, with a gate that I assumed led to the backyard. Shrubs surrounded the fence, pebbles and stones lied beneath the flower beds, and even more flowers were flitted around the gate.

It was all very pleasing to the eye, and I could already be certain that I'd be able to enjoy myself in a place like this. *And heck, I haven't even seen the backyard yet!*

I found that my paws were eagerly taking me up the steps, and

right up to this house's door, where a big, colorfully-striped pelt hung from it. I then sat down and took a deep breath, bracing myself for what I was going to have to do once I caught the Twolegs' attention. *The plan I've made that will hopefully allow me to be let in to this house.*

I then snorted as I took a step forward to lightly scratch on the wooden surface. *Or rather, be pitied to be let into this house.*

I then backed up and sat down a couple of tail-lengths from the door, trying to cling to my dignity as I began to muster up the most somber, miserable and pathetic meows that I could. *Lilypetal was right...* I thought, recalling the conversation that I'd had with my sister just moments ago. *The things that kittypets do for Twolegs really is baffling! I really can't let myself think about that for too long...*

But despite my discomfort, I continued on with my pitiful, pained yowls, praying to some higher power that some Twoleg would come to the door to shut me up soon. And I was actually encouraged when I could hear some footsteps come from the other side of the wooden platform.

And just as the doorknob began to turn and the lock click, I lowered my head down closer to my chest. *It's showtime.*

Then, I heard the quiet creak of the door opening, and the shadow of what I immediately recognized as a Twoleg loomed over my pelt. *Alright, Oreo – head up.*

I quickly rose my head, immediately locking gazes with the male Twoleg in front me. *Ears flat...*

I then lowered my ears so that I could feel their tips on the side of my head. *Look up, annnddd...*

I then cocked my head just slightly, letting out the softest, weak little meow that I could manage. *There we go.*

I tried my best to keep this position as I watched the Twoleg stare down at me, its large, hairless paws touching their own face. But as it then began to talk to me, its voice was higher and soft, as if they

were trying not to alarm me.

The male Twoleg then turned around, and I nearly flinched as it raised its voice, likely calling out to something from inside of the house. Just moments later, another male Twoleg appeared at the doorway, looking just as amazed and pleased as their friend had within moments.

Then, without hesitation, it bent forward and stroked my head a couple of times before actually picking me up, and bringing me inside of the house. And as the creature held me close in their arms, I couldn't help but let out an exhausted, relieved huff. *Well, that was easy,* I then thought. *Gosh, I hope that I never have to pose like that again!*

I heard the first male Twoleg shut the door behind us as the other Twoleg carried me through the front rooms of their house. While the outside had looked fairly standard – this interior was certainly not like anything I'd ever seen before; the ceilings were high, with clean, shiny wooden floors. White was most certainly these Twolegs' favorite color, but the sun beams shining in from the windows made all of the furniture look so bright and cozy, in a way. What wasn't white was some bright, gaudy-looking pattern.

Honestly, I was a fan.

I was so entranced by everything around me that I hardly noticed when the Twoleg that had been carrying me actually put me down, and I found that my pads were settling on a somewhat cold, white stone-like tile. It only took me a moment to realize that I was in what was probably their kitchen. *They assumed that taking me to the kitchen would be the best idea...* I thought, staring up in awe at these two hairless creatures that had so kindly and easily brought me into their home. *I like these two already.*

I then watched as the first one enthusiastically ran towards a large white box that had its own little door. *My last Twolegs had something like this, and they kept their food in it...* please *let this be the same thing!*

I continued to stare intently as one of the male Twolegs seemed to

be digging through the white box, occasionally looking back at the other male Twoleg, nodding to him as used his paw to gesture to something.

And only after a few more heartbeats of this, I nearly let out a gasp as the male Twoleg that'd had his head in the box finally step back, revealing the small, wonderful-smelling block of cheese that they held in one their paws.

Score!

I actually had to suppress the urge to lick my lips as I ran up to the Twoleg, immediately leaping up and grabbing the small treat in my mouth as both creatures seemed to howl with amusement. I let the two no-furred creatures stroke my back as I bent down and began to feast, and I didn't even bat an eye when they seemed to be observing the old, worn collar that I was still wearing from my old housefolk.

To my surprise, after a moment, I actually felt them gently begin to take off the collar, as I continued to work on my cheese. And the collar's jingling slowly began to fade away as I then felt something softer and a bit looser being wrapped and tied around my neck.

Now incredibly overwhelmed with curiosity, I swallowed my last bite of my cheese and lifted my head, trying my best to look down at the strange new thing that was wrapped around my neck fur.

It appeared to be some sort of thin-looking pelt. It was dark blue, but was also covered with some sort of pretty-looking white pattern. *Whatever it is, it is much, much more comfortable than my collar was!* I thought cheerfully as I lifted one of my paws to touch it.

I then slowly began to shake my head in amazement as I sat down on my haunches. *These Twolegs are nice, they give me cool things, their house is neat, and they give me yummy food,* I realized in amazement, looking up at the two hairless creatures that stared back down at me warmly. *And among all of that, I'm still close to Lilypetal and Mistpelt!*

I let let out a satisfied grunt as I lashed my tail back and forth. *I definitely need to give it some more time, but I'd already say that I did a pretty darn good job with my pick!*

Chapter 2

After a few more delectable cheese cubes and some house exploring, and being introduced to a lovely, soft and fluffy pillow that would serve as my cat bed, the two male Twolegs finally let me outside into their backyard.

Truthfully, the surroundings here were just as pleasing to the eye as they were up front – shrubs, pebbles and flowers galore. The trees of the forest loomed over the yard, there was plenty of space within the enclosure, a couple of trees inside of the yard to climb, and even a small little waterfall that flowed down into a little stream. And the stream had these long, bright colored fish in it. *These Twolegs are lucky that I'm not even going to attempt to catch one of them!*

I wandered around this epic place for just a little while before finally deciding to pad up to the gate that I had been able to see from the front, and it was cracked open just enough to where I could squeeze through. *But that might change if these Twolegs keep giving me those amazing pieces of cheese...*

I then began to pad alongside the brick wall of the house, heading back towards the front yard. On this side of the large brick structure, I noticed that there was only a single window that would take a bit of a jump to get up to it. I narrowed my eyes, a smirk emerging on my face as I realized that my new housefolk had left it slightly cracked open. *Hm... possibly another passage to the front or back yard when the Twolegs don't want to let me out through the back door...*

I then quickened my pace, finally arriving to the front yard. The yard was significantly more shadowy since I'd last seen it, and I looked up to see that the sun was quite low to the sky now, and was just about to hide behind the house across the Thunderpath.

But it was still large and in charge, lighting up the sky in an orange, pink and red beautiful mess. *Gee, am I definitely going to try and*

catch this view every evening! I thought to myself. *Not bad.*

I then let out a long, contented sigh as I sat down where I was, simply staring back at the setting sun. *Not bad at all.*

"Hi!"

I pricked my ears with surprise, feeling like it had been so long since I'd heard the voice of another cat. But despite my shock, I quickly whipped my head around towards some shrubs next to the Thunderpath when I saw their leaves shake.

And I felt my eyes slowly widen with the figure that eventually emerged from them. *Golly...*

Swiftly padding into my sight was definitively... *definitively* – the most beautiful she-cat that I had ever laid eyes on. Her fur was a pale ginger with tabby stripes that were just a bit darker. She had a white, fluffy chest and ear tips, and her eyes were an amazing blue with brown flecks that were so prominent in the evening light.

As beautiful as she was, I forced myself to stay calm, giving my fur a shake. *Pace yourself, Oreo*, I tried to tell myself. *For all you know, she's the nastiest, most vile cat known to all cats.*

But it quickly became clear to me that that was not the case at all. Her warm, kind gaze said it all already. *Well, shoot...*

In fact, the she-cat's eyes were seemingly a bit hesitant as she trotted up to stand in front of me. "I'm so sorry if I'm bothering you, but..." she then meowed to me in a soft, sweet voice that sounded like a dove's coo. "I saw you from my house, and I didn't think I recognized you, so I thought that I'd come over to say 'hello'!"

I attempted to open my mouth to give a reply, but absolutely nothing escaped my jaws.

Luckily, the she-cat continued to speak before my lack of words made this encounter significantly more awkward. She sat down, wrapping her tail neatly around her paws as she tilted her head to the side. "Are you new here?" she asked me, her stunning eyes glowing with genuine interest.

I finally forced myself to shake my head, bringing myself back into focus, and I even gave my brain a quick lesson on how to speak.

But I suppose that it still didn't work very well. "N-new? I-I, well, I guess you could say that I'm sort of... I mean-"

I then proceeded to shake my head once again, trying with all of my might to make my next words make sense for this poor she-cat's sake. "Yes, I am new here," I finally answered. "I-I have family that lives out in the forest nearby, and I wanted to find a house in this neighborhood so that I could be near them!"

I could barely stand to look at the eyes full of admiration and awe that stared back at me. "Aw, that is so sweet of you!" She purred to me in reply. "I'm sure that they'll be so happy to know that you're making the effort to stay nearby."

I quickly felt my ears grow hot, and I had to look away for a moment. "Ah, well..."

I then looked back at the she-cat as I heard her let out a small purr of amusement, and then begin to speak again. "So, what is your name?"

I had to hesitate for another moment as I looked back at the she-cat once again. *How is any cat supposed to even think straight when looking at a she-cat as pretty as that?*

But nevertheless, I was fairly quick with my reply, and I raised one of my paws to her in greeting. "My name is Oreo!" I tried to meow in my typical, more cheerful, normal sounding voice. "What's yours, if you don't mind me asking?"

The she-cat let out another purr of amusement that made my stomach flip over. "Of course I don't mind!" She meowed just before dipping her head to me and meeting my gaze again, her eyes still warm and kind. "Well, welcome to the neighborhood, Oreo! My name is Chloe. I live in the house right across the Thunderpath."

"Well, Chloe, it is a pleasure to meet you," I replied, dipping my head back to her. *Gee, even her name is pretty and sweet...* I thought,

just a moment before my ears flicked with a realization. *Wait a moment...*

I felt my heart beginning to lift with excitement, and I took a step closer to Chloe as I tilted my own head to the side. "Did you say that you live just across the Thunderpath?" I questioned her, trying to shield the happiness that was likely oozing from my pelt. "As in, just across the Thunderpath from this house I'm living in?"

My heart even more as Chloe immediately gave a nod. "Yes, I do!" She answered cheerfully, briefly glancing back towards the white wooden house that was apparently her own. "I suppose that I'm fairly new here as well – my female Twoleg and I only moved to this neighborhood a few seasons ago."

"Oh, yeah?" I meowed, padding up so that I could stand just next to Chloe. "What made your Twoleg decide to move?"

Chloe flicked her ears, narrowing her blue-brown eyes as she seemed to contemplate the question – very adorably, might I add – for a few moments. "Hm... I think that it was maybe because some big, big monsters were making so much noise nearby," she eventually answered me. She then sniffed with amusement as she began to shake her head slowly. "I didn't need to understand anything that she was saying to see how frustrated she was getting with it, so I guess that she ultimately decided to get away from it all!"

I sniffed with amusement as well once Chloe had finished her explanation. "I don't blame her for that!" I exclaimed, knowing very well that even I couldn't handle that many monsters at once. "Do you miss your old home at all?"

Chloe seemed to think for a moment about this question as well. *She's very thoughtful and articulate with her words...* I observed, my fur tingling as I watched her. *I like that.* "Sometimes I do, and living somewhere completely new definitely took some adjusting," she then answered, her eyes briefly glossing over with sorrow. "And I had some friends back at home that meant so, so much to me. There aren't too many cats nearby that live around here. But, hey!"

I then felt my eyes widen and my heart nearly skip a beat as I felt Chloe give me the lightest, softest nudge on my shoulder. "Now I have a new prospect right across the road!"

I simply stared back at the she-cat for a few moments, hardly being able to process her words. "W-what? Me?" I stammered, utterly baffled. I then suppressed a frustrated huff and shook my head quickly. "Y-yes. Yes, me! Yes, you do!"

While most cats I'd been around would have likely shown deep concern at how much I was stuttering and tripping over my own words, Chloe simply continued to look warmly back at me, purring as her eyes glowed with amusement. "I'm glad," she then meowed sweetly. "I-"

I then felt a small pang of disappointment as the clear yowl of a Twoleg came from across the Thunderpath, cutting off whatever Chloe had been about to say. And clearly, the pale ginger she-cat knew what the yowl meant, flicking her gaze back towards her own home before looking back at me, her gaze actually reflecting my own disappointment as she began to pad towards the Thunderpath. "Oh, dear. I have to go - it sounds like my Twoleg is calling me."

Just as I thought that the she-cat was going to leave me without any more words or a gesture in farewell, she whipped herself back around in my direction, her eyes glowing with eagerness. "But hey, maybe we can talk again soon!" She called back to me. "I can give you a tour of the neighborhood, if you'd like?"

Every word that Chloe had meowed since she'd turned back around had sounded like beautiful chirping birds singing in my ears, and I nodded to her, complying with her words without hesitation. "I would definitely like that!" I purred. "When?"

Chloe flicked her tail back and forth as she thought about my question. "Hm... just come out into your yard when you're ready, and I'll try and come out to you as soon as I can!" She then replied, then proceeding to run across the Thunderpath when she had a free moment. "See you then, Oreo! It was so nice to meet you!"

My eyes remained on the pale ginger tabby she-cat as she leaped

into her own yard. "You too, Chloe!" I then continued to watch her, my heart welling up with warmth and my stomach twisting as she then crawled through a little flap in her house's front door.

I then let out another contented sigh once she had completely disappeared from my sight. *Yep, yep, yep...*

I then glanced back towards my own home. *I did a pretty darn great job with my pick.*

Mother Knows Best

[image]

Read on to discover the motivation behind a certain tortoiseshell queen's fierce protection for her daughter, and against the cat her daughter was padding after...

Poppyfrost's POV

The sunlight leaked through the medicine den's bramble screen, warming my flank as I anxiously watched Jayfeather, the ThunderClan medicine cat, sniff at the small ginger bundle that was clinging to my fur.

I really hoped that I wasn't showing it, my mind was spiraling with fear and nerves, and heartbeats felt like entire seasons as I anxiously awaited the gray tabby tom's next words. *Oh, StarClan, please...* I prayed to my warrior ancestors as I pressed myself even closer to my daughter next to me. *Cherrykit has already been in here for three days, and I don't know what I'll do if there has to be a fourth...*

I then forced myself to break my gaze from my kit, nervously following Jayfeather's movement as he padded to the back of the medicine den. I quickly recognized the strong scent of catmint as he then walked up to sit in front of me and Cherrykit, holding out one of his paws.

The tom didn't even have to say a word. Cherrykit looked up at me, letting out a small, dejected yet determined sigh before licking up the plant, as she had already done many times up until this point. *The poor thing... anyone could see that having whitecough and being stuck in this medicine den have definitely tested her spirits, but I can tell that she is trying her hardest to not let it get to her.*

I slowly bent my head down to give Cherrykit a gentle lick on the head. "You've been so strong, Cherrykit," I purred softly to the little ginger she-cat as she swallowed the last of the catmint. "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be clear of this whitecough in no time."

I heard my daughter let out another sigh as she nuzzled her smaller head into my fur. "Thanks, mother," she meowed to me, before proceeding to shake out her fur, stand up, and raise her chin high. "I know that I will; this silly cough is nothing! If I'm going to be a warrior someday, I'll need to learn to face a lot of difficult things!"

My heart growing with affection, and a purr rising in my throat, I bent my head down once again to rub my muzzle against Cherrykit's head. *That's my brave, optimistic daughter... she seems to be braver than I am, sometimes,* I realized, my heart seeming to sink as I stared down at her. *She's right – she will face many difficult things as she grows up, but... I wish that she didn't have to endure even one as long as she lives.*

I then followed my daughter's gaze as she seemed to be looking out towards the medicine den entrance, and the ThunderClan camp. *I mean, I've thought that since Berrynose and I first found out that we were having kits at all.*

I then let out a shaky sigh as I looked back down at Cherrykit. *And I'm sure that neither Berrynose or me could bear to lose Cherrykit or Molekit... not after Honeyfern*, I thought, having to screw my eyes shut in pain for just a moment as I remembered my sister, and Berrynose's first mate.

I then gently ran my tail along Cherrykit's flank as I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself down. *I can't stand to see my kits in any sort of pain, let alone... go to StarClan like Honeyfern did,* I thought worriedly. *It won't happen. I won't let it happen.* "What are you looking at, sweetheart?" I then whispered to Cherrykit, who was still seemed to be fixated on something beyond the medicine den. Her big amber eyes were sparkling against the sun rays, and her head was slightly tilted to the side.

And I couldn't help but let out a small purr of amusement as she flicked her ears in surprise, shaking her head quickly at the sound of my voice. "What was that?" she asked me, her gaze apologetic as she seemed to jerk herself back into focus.

I narrowed my eyes, briefly flicking my gaze out towards camp. Not too much was in sight from where we sat - just the fresh-kill pile, a

bit of the Highledge, and all of the apprentices sharing a meal after their latest training session. "What were you looking at out there?" I asked my daughter again.

For some reason, Cherrykit seemed to hesitate with her answer, giving a small shrug. "Oh! What was I looking at? Well..." I raised a single eyebrow and tilted my head as I watched her stammer. "I... I was looking at..."

I then couldn't help but let out an interested, skeptical grunt as Cherrykit then flicked her ears, her eyes widening with excitement as she flicked her gaze back towards the medicine den entrance. "Molekit!" she then cried out as she stood up. "Molekit is here!"

My curiosity quickly diminished, and was replaced with panic at how much energy my daughter had used just within heartbeats. "Cherrykit, calm down and rest your voice, please!" I insisted to her as I pushed her flank down with my tail. "You most definitely won't be out of here tonight if you don't rest, or if you hurt your voice!"

Cherrykit let out another sigh, not resisting my touch as she lied back down in our moss nest. "Sorry," she meowed more softly, flashing me bashful, slightly embarrassed look.

I returned my daughter's glance before letting out a purr at the sight of my other kit that had indeed made his way into the medicine den. "Hi, there, Molekit!" I meowed warmly to my brown-and-cream son as I touched my nose to his little ear. "What made you want to stop by?"

I then let out another purr of amusement as Molekit practically skidded up to our nest, skidding to a halt just in front of his sister. "I really wanted to tell Cherrykit about what I just did!" he then mewed excitedly. "Berrynose just gave me a battling lesson!"

Cherrykit let out a gasp, her eyes widening with awe as she stared back at her brother. "Really? That is amazing!" Her voice was bright and optimistic, but I could so clearly see the glint of longing and sadness in her amber eyes. "What did he teach you?"

I began to softly stroke Cherrykit's flank as we both watched

Molekit excitedly pace the area, and I felt my heart seem to grow with warmth as I listened to him describe what my mate had decided to do with my son. "... and then he showed me how to begin the underbelly slash!" Molekit went on enthusiastically, demonstrating what his father had taught him by lying down on the ground, rolling over, and raising his forepaws up in the air. "Like... like *that!*"

"Wow..." Cherrykit sighed, her sorrow becoming increasingly more apparent as she flicked her gaze briefly towards the den entrance once again. "That looks like so much fun. I can't wait until I can learn that!"

Molekit quickly leaped back up onto all four of his paws. "What do you mean? I'm sure that Berrynose could teach you right now!" I then felt a pang of sadness as Molekit began to pelt out of the medicine den, looking back to see that his sister wasn't following. His amber eyes seemed to flash with disappointment and realization. "Well... he will once you get out of here," he then murmured.

He then let out a huff, beginning to anxiously knead his paws into the ground. "When is that going to be? It feels like it has been *forever!*"

Following Molekit's words, Cherrykit looked up at me for a moment, her eyes now full of sadness, before looking back at her brother. "I'm not sure, Molekit," she breathed hoarsely. She then let out a huff, shook her head quickly, and lifted her head once more. "Whenever it is, I'm really, really looking forward to it!" Her voice was lighter, and her eyes were much brighter with these words, which brought me to sigh with relief.

Molekit's eyes also lit up, and he began to hop around in front of the two of us. "Me too!" he squeaked. "It'll be soon. I just *know* it will!" I then couldn't help but purr again as I watched my son let out a quick sigh, sitting down and waiting patiently as if only moments would pass by before Cherrykit would be given permission to leave.

Nevertheless, I let him sit and watch as Jayfeather returned to

Cherrykit's side, beginning to check her over again while I observed anxiously. He had her open her mouth, stand up, move around, and even cough a couple of times.

And all while this was happening, I still noticed that Cherrykit seemed to be taking glances out towards the ThunderClan camp. I really didn't want to think anything of it; after all, she had just shared her desire to be released from the medicine den and go out into camp, but... the glint in her eyes was definitely something that I hadn't seen before, at least... not many times. *And for some reason, it doesn't sit right with me, but...* I then took a deep breath, forcing myself to push these thoughts away once again. *Then again, she's never been cooped up in the medicine den with whitecough before, either.*

I then brought my attention back to my other kit, Molekit, who already seemed to be growing antsy from where he sat just a tail-length away, and I felt a pang of curiosity and apprehension as he then jumped up and ran towards an empty moss nest.

He then proceeded to rip a clump of the moss away from the rest, quickly roll it up, and then strike it with a single paw towards Cherrykit. Jayfeather had walked back towards his herbs at the back of the den, and wasn't able to take notice. "Mossball! C'mon, Cherrykit!" Molekit yelped to his ginger tabby sister. "You can do something as easy as passing it back to me, right?"

I ruthlessly pushed down my impatience, trying to keep my voice calm as I flashed my son a warning look. "Molekit! Did you not hear what I just said to-"

"Actually, Cherrykit might be able to pass that mossball back," I flicked my ears with surprise as I heard Jayfeather's voice cut me off from behind me, and I looked back at see that the gray tabby medicine cat was padding back up to us, certainty in his blind blue eyes. "Cherrykit is doing very well; she has recovered very quickly."

I felt my eyes slowly begin to widen, and my heart begin to race with excitement. "Recovered? So, that means..."

Jayfeather gave a single sharp, curt nod. "Yes, Cherrykit is

released," he muttered before turning back towards his herbs once again. "And at a good time, too – I can already tell that many more cats are going to be in her position very soon."

Oh, thank StarClan!

I let out a long, relieved sigh, a weight the size of a mountain being lifted off of my shoulders as I heard my daughter let out an excited squeal. "Thank you so much, Jayfeather!" she then meowed cheerfully to the medicine cat. "Thank you for taking care of me!"

I then felt yet another purr rise in my throat as I then felt my daughter's flank press up against mine. "And thank you, mother, for staying in here with me!" I then felt Cherrykit pull away, and I looked down to see her finally bash against the mossball, causing it to pelt towards her brother. "Come on, Molekit!" she then called out to him, who was already halfway out of the den entrance. "Let's play!"

Then, as Cherrykit hit the mossball, she almost seemed to match its speed as she pelted out of the medicine den and out into the camp. I followed more slowly, briefly touching my tail to Jayfeather's shoulder in gratitude before following my two kits out, my heart feeling immensely warm as I watched them play together. *I wasn't sure when I'd be able to do this next...* I thought solemnly as I decided to settle down just outside of the nursery. *When Cherrykit was first diagnosed, I even wondered if I'd ever be able to do it again!*

I then lowered my head so that it was resting on my two front paws, and I realized for the first time in a few days just how exhausted I was. *Worrying for your kit's life, and then hating that you can't give as much attention to the other is a truly draining, horrible thing to endure*, I thought. *Every cough of Cherrykit's broke my heart, and each time Molekit would poke his head into the medicine den made me want to yowl out in pain. But it's over now...* I tried to tell myself. *Your kits are safe. Cherrykit is all better, and now she and Molekit are together again.*

I then allowed my eyelids to close for a few moments as I let out a sigh. *You have nothing at all to worry about.*

Then, once I opened my eyes again, I proceeded to watch, purring and letting out *mrrows* of laughter as I continued to watch my two kits play their game of mossball. And I found that my curiosity from earlier was beginning to well up inside of me again as I realized that Cherrykit still seemed to be taking glances towards the very same spot that she'd been looking at from inside of the medicine den. *Strange,* I thought as I felt my eyes narrow down into slits. *Very strange.*

Now, I could deduce that Cherrykit hadn't been doing it out of desire for wanting to be released from the medicine den. *She is looking at something else, but what?*

This very question was pressing in my mind as I committed to watch Cherrykit more closely, trying to decipher what kept attempting to steal her attention. And sure enough, the more the I watched her, the more preoccupied that my daughter seemed to be, taking glances towards the fresh-kill pile and the Highledge every few heartbeats.

And eventually, to my complete shock, Cherrykit stopped in her tracks altogether, coming to a stop and not even seeming to notice when the mossball that Molekit had tossed hit her right in the flank. "Cherrykit! What's your problem?" my son called back to Cherrykit, running up to her and giving her a prod with one of his paws before padding back to his original spot. "Pass it back to me! Hurry!"

Even with Molekit's nudge and his words, Cherrykit didn't budge. *What in the name of...*

I found myself standing up, and taking a few steps closer to my two kits so that I could touch my nose to Cherrykit's ear. Simultaneously, I was trying to push back my strong feelings of frustration and curiosity. "Cherrykit," I muttered to her tautly. "Your brother is trying to get your attention."

Finally, my daughter seemed to snap out of it, letting out a gasp as she shook her head quickly. "Oh... sorry!" she forced out after a moment, then proceeding to leap forward and slash the mossball back towards her brother. "Here you go, Molekit!"

I only looked back at my kits for a single heartbeat as they continued their game, not wanting to waste one more moment trying to figure out what Cherrykit could possibly be staring at so intently.

I was attempting to stare off at the exact place that I'd seen her glance at countless times over, and I pricked my ears with confusion as I observed that absolutely nothing had changed about it since we'd left the medicine den – the Highledge was there, as big and bright as ever as it reflected against the sun; the fresh-kill pile was there, large and abundant; *and the apprentices are still surrounding it, enjoying their meals.*

I then flicked my ears. *The apprentices are there.*

All four of ThunderClan's apprentices – Dovepaw, Ivypaw, Snowpaw and Swiftpaw – still remained near the fresh-kill pile. Ivypaw and Dovepaw, the two sisters, were sharing a small finch just near the pile, Snowpaw was eating a mouse just a tail-length away from them...

And then there was Swiftpaw, a couple of tail-lengths from Snowpaw, eating a shrew. *Right next to the Highledge...*

I then flicked my gaze just briefly back to Cherrykit. *And right where my daughter is staring.*

My eyes slowly began to narrow, and I felt myself having to hold back a snarl. *You've got to be kidding me.*

I honestly would have preferred Cherrykit to be staring at a badger tearing away at a rotting corpse. *At the moment, it almost seems like that badger has more heart than that pesky little apprentice.*

Swiftpaw – Goldenshine and Mousewhisker's only kit – had only been an apprentice for a couple of quarter moons now, but that gray black tom had already managed to push me past my limit. He'd always been a short-tempered, snappy kit from the moment he could speak and comprehend words, but it had seemed that the older he got, the ruder and more hostile he'd become.

And the fact that my daughter was taking the time to even give him the smallest glance immensely concerned me, not when he'd already disrespected her, among many others, countless times. He seemed to snap at her whenever she showed concern for him, *and he had the audacity to tell her to be quiet in the middle of one of her coughing fits!* I recalled, hardly being able to control my temper as I looked back on that instance from just a few days ago. *Who is heartless enough to say something like that to a cat who is sick?*

That would be enough to bring me to resent the tom on its own. A cat who messed with my daughter and son also messed with me.

But Swiftpaw didn't give his other Clanmates any less negative attention. He often snapped at his own mentor, Foxleap, scarcely spoke to any cat, and even neglected to speak with his own *mother*. I hadn't seen the two of them exchange even one word for days. And not only did he disrespect every cat around him, but he also exemplified the complete opposite of what a true Clan cat and Clanmate was.

And my hatred for the tom continued to bubble up inside of me as I watched him and Snowpaw converse from where I sat near the nursery. Snowpaw seemed to be watching Cherrykit and Molekit, her blue eyes bright with interest. "Wow, we haven't played mossball in what feels like moons, Swiftpaw!"

The dark gray tom took the last bite of his shrew, then proceeded to glance towards my two kits, and then give a roll of his eyes and a snort. "And those have been the happiest moons of my life," he muttered in reply.

My eyes managed to narrow even smaller with those words as I watched Snowpaw then stand up. "Oh, come on! We should totally give it a try!" she encouraged Swiftpaw, running back towards the Highledge and snatching up a clump of moss growing on the stone. "Cherrykit and Molekit sure seem to be having a great time! Who's it going to hurt?"

"My dignity, that's what," Swiftpaw then meowed tautly, standing up and shaking out his fur. "Cherrykit and Molekit are enjoying it because they are *kits*, Snowpaw. I'm sorry if you're slow, but that's

not what we are anymore."

Snowpaw rolled her eyes right back at Swiftpaw, clearly used to receiving replies like this. "Oh, fine," she sighed, her ears only flattening for a moment before they perked up again, her eyes lightening up. "Well, how about we go out into the forest and climb trees? That's something that kits can't do!"

Swiftpaw didn't even give Snowpaw a sidelong glance, and began to pad towards the warriors den. "And something that I *refuse* to do."

Snowpaw began to follow after her friend. "Well, then what about maybe playing some hide and seek? You've always been so good at it!"

Swiftpaw stopped in his tracks for a moment, screwing his eyes and giving a small, frustrated shake of his head that I didn't think Snowpaw even could see. "No, Snowpaw."

"Then what about having a race towards the WindClan border? We could-"

I then nearly took a step back, my ears pricking with alarm as Swiftpaw let out a hiss, whipping himself back around to face the white-and-gray she-cat. "For StarClan's sake, *no*, Snowpaw! When are you going to take the hint?" he practically growled back at his Clanmate. "All of those things are a complete waste of time, and completely ridiculous! I'm not going to do any of it, so even don't bother trying."

Then, without waiting for Snowpaw's reply, he turned back around and began to pad even more quickly towards the warriors den. "I'm going to find Foxleap, and see if he can take me out training," he then called back to her.

Great StarClan, that horrible...

My heart then felt as if it were physically sinking as I looked back at Snowpaw and saw the hurt look in her eyes. "Fine..." she nearly whispered, standing in her same place for a few moments before slowly turning around to walk back to the fresh-kill pile. "Maybe he

can give you a lesson on how to actually have some *fun*..."

Although the she-cat's words had been too quiet for Swiftpaw to hear, I almost wanted to pray to StarClan that he'd caught at least a sliver of it. *Because that sure is what he needs to hear...* I told myself. *Along with many, many other things, oh, StarClan!*

I then finally returned my gaze to Molekit and Cherrykit, who were still deep into playing with their mossball. My eyes quickly fell on Cherrykit, who now seemed to be taking glances towards the very place that Swiftpaw had disappeared into the warriors den. *Please, let my premonitions be wrong.*

But my gut told me that they weren't, as much as I didn't want to admit it. I now knew why the look in my daughter's amber eyes had seemed so unsettling to me. It was the very same look that my Clanmates had described to me that I had whenever I looked at Berrynose. *Oh, StarClan...* I repeated to my warrior ancestors. *If Cherrykit is admiring Swiftpaw...*

I slowly felt my heart's beat begin to increase all over again, and I suddenly felt a sort of urgency for something that I didn't know how to fix. *I would be terrified if she was even just a few tail-lengths from him! He is the last cat that I would want Cherrykit spending time with. He sets a terrible example, for one.*

I then stood up, taking a few steps closer to my kits before settling down again. *And if I can barely stand to see my daughter suffer from a mild cough, I cannot even imagine having to witness the amount of pain Cherrykit would endure if she were to spend time with a cat like that. If he is so disrespectful to his mother, and to his supposed "friend", then I can barely begin to guess how he'd treat my daughter – the sweetest, most thoughtful she-cat that I know.*

I then shut my eyes, giving a violent shake of my own head as if to get rid of all of these horrible thoughts. *But maybe I'm just blowing this completely out of proportion*, I tried to tell myself. *Clearly, Swiftpaw doesn't like to think of any other cat outside of himself. Why would he waste his time trying to get closer to Cherrykit?*

I then forced myself to take a deep breath, closing my eyes. *I hope*

that I don't even have to worry about it.

But when I let my lids flit open again, I felt my heart nearly skip a beat as my eyes immediately fell back on Cherrykit, who was once again looking off at something in the distance.

I followed her gaze to see that Swiftpaw had left the warriors den, and he was now following Foxleap towards the camp entrance. I then had to hold back a gasp as the dark gray tom's gaze locked with Cherrykit's. He stood frozen, staring back at her for just a moment before actually giving the smallest nod and continuing to follow his mentor out of camp.

I then looked back at Cherrykit, whose amber eyes were too bright and joyful for my liking.

And as she then continued to play mossball with her brother, I found myself having to close my eyes once again. *I really,* really *hope that I don't have to worry about it,* I repeated to myself. *Cherrykit only deserves the best things. As a mother, I am supposed to make sure that she gets them. And Swiftpaw has already proven over and over that he isn't even close to that.*

Together Alone

[image]

Read on to find out why a certain former kittypet, who eventually came to win the heart of one of Lilypetal's daughters, came to separate from his first love...

Dusty's POV

Chapter 1

It was dark, musty, and compact.

Old toys were scattered all over the place, their existence now having been forgotten since being knocked into this hiding spot. Crumbs were flitted around, practically being hugged by the carpet beneath my paws. A bunch of dust bunnies threatened to throw me into a hacking fit with each time that I inhaled.

But none of that mattered right now.

All that mattered was the tiny gray, plump creature that was just a few tail-lengths away, nibbling on a pellet.

One of *my* pellets.

I crouched down even lower from where I hid under the couch, holding my breath so that I didn't breath in one of the stupid dust bunnies, and braced myself to leap. *Here we go... that little brat is going to regret taking my food!*

Just a moment later, when I was sure the time was right, I let out a determined yowl and jumped out from under the piece of furniture, launching myself straight at the mouse.

I nearly wanted to cry out in triumph as I felt my paws almost immediately land on the creature, but I then had to hold back a growl of frustration as it quickly wriggled out of my grip, beginning to run towards the kitchen.

I stood up straight, letting out a grunt as I flicked my ears. "Aw, that's funny," I muttered just before breaking into a run once again. *It thinks that we're done here!*

Letting my adrenaline carry me forward, I pelted at full speed after the mouse. I tried with all of my might to keep my eye on the prize, swerving around tables and chairs, and leaping over boxes and bags. *Come on, Dusty!* I then picked up speed, even with the risk of having a slower reaction time to barriers. *He was eating your pellet, he was eating your pellet...*

I then felt my heart almost explode out of my chest, my teeth grinding together as I suddenly had to skid to a halt. I then screwed my eyes shut as I heard my pads squeak against the hard floor.

I then opened my eyes once again to see that I had just barely saved myself from crashing straight into a table leg. *Whew...*

I then yanked my attention back to the task at hand, but quickly felt my heart sink as I peered past the table to see that the darned mouse had run into its usual hole into the wall, and had disappeared.

With my pellet.

I couldn't help but let out a hiss as I pawed one of my toys to the side. "Aw, son of a duck!"

"Son of a duck?"

I was still staring bitterly at the spot that the mouse had vanished when my sister, Pippy, trotted towards me from deeper into the kitchen. Her head was tilted to the side, and her big green eyes were glowing with humor. "Isn't the son of a duck also a duck?"

Still not averting my gaze, I bent down to attempt to take a peek into the hole in the wall. "Hey, it's not my curse!"

After a few heartbeats, I finally stepped back and lifted my head to look at Pippy, who was staring right back me as she shook her head slowly. "Gee, you've been after that mouse for what feels like *seasons* now," she meowed to me in amazement. She then gestured

to the cursed mouse's hiding spot with her tail. "Do you think you'll ever catch it before it flees into that little hole?"

I puffed out my chest and lifted my chin, trying to push away my anger and disappointment. "Oh, I know that I will!" I exclaimed, my shoulders then sinking just a bit. "I'm... just not sure when."

I then glanced back at the hole in the wall, letting out a snort. "I've been at this so long that I'm honestly thinking of giving the little rascal a name!"

Pippy purred with amusement as she began to lash her tail back and forth. "Hm... like Idiot?" she queried. "Stupid? Nuisance? *Speedy*?"

"No, I was thinking maybe Darryl."

"Right, sure."

"And Darryl isn't going to see many more days, I'm going to make sure of that!" I then declared, sticking my muzzle into the hole as I spoke. I then narrowed my eyes, glancing back towards the table leg that my face had nearly become a leaf because of. "If I could just... figure where I'm going wrong." *Well... besides nearly breaking my face because of furniture.*

I looked back at Pippy to see that she was now scanning her eyes around the kitchen, one of her eyebrows raised. "Well, for starters, I'd say that hunting a mouse *inside* of a nest probably isn't the best idea," she pointed out before beginning to pad towards the back door that led to our yard. "Wouldn't you rather go out to the forest and sniff out a wild mouse? There's so much more space, freedom, and, well..."

Pippy then sniffed, giving a sharp nod towards the ground. "We'd *both* get to avoid having a mini bloodbath on our floor!"

I let out a purr of amusement, taking one last glance towards the hole before padding over to the back door with Pippy. "You're not wrong," I muttered once I'd made it to my sister's side.

I then let out a sigh as my eyes fell on the sight beyond the transparent barrier, and the fence that enclosed our backyard - the

trees that towered over our neighborhood that tempted me every single day since Pippy and I had been taken to this house as kits.

They didn't even have to do a thing; I mean, they were *trees*. *Yet, somehow... the older that I get, the more that I want to be closer to them... under them!* "And trust me, I've definitely thought about maybe sneaking out and hunting in the forest a bit..." I finally went on to Pippy.

I then let out a sigh, slightly hesitating with my next words. "But I typically don't get the chance to, because of-"

My words were then cut off by Pippy's excited gasp.

Although I probably would have cut myself off anyway, considering she was peering past me and likely not listening anymore.

I then began to hear pawsteps come from behind me, and I finally followed my sister's gaze to see that Smudge - a black and white tom that had lived in this house on his own before Pippy and I had been adopted together - was coming into sight from the hallway. His amber eyes were bright with amusement, and I noticed the slight shake of his head.

I exchanged a glance with Pippy, my ears flicking with intrigue, as I was very curious to hear what the older tom had gotten out of his trip to the back bedroom, where our two Twolegs and a new furry arrival currently presided.

Just days before, our housefolk had *completely* taken us by surprise when they'd walked into our nest holding a sleeping cat in their arms. We had no idea where this cat - a tom with dark ginger fur - had come from, *and we seriously wonder if we'll ever know!*

Our Twolegs had taken him to one of the bedrooms and had shut the door. So far, Smudge seemed to be the only cat they were comfortable letting in to actually interact with the newcomer.

So, that meant that Pippy and I would have to just receive the rundown from our older friend. "So," I began, running eagerly up to meet Smudge. "How is the stray doing?"

Smudge came to a stop, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "He's doing just fine," he replied, before letting out a sniff. "The vet clearly did him some good. But gee, I don't think anyone could take him seriously with that big white thing he's wearing on his neck."

I could hear Pippy beginning to snicker from behind me. "The poor thing," she purred. "Hey, Dusty - you could use one of those, and scoop Darryl right up!"

I briefly looked back at the black she-cat so that I could flash her annoyed glance through narrowed eyes. "Very funny, sis."

I then looked back at Smudge to see him staring back at us in confusion, his head tilting to the side. "Darryl?" he repeated, his voice full of laughter.

"Long story," I answered the tom, giving a dismissing lash of my tail before taking another step closer to him. "So, do you think our housefolk are going to keep him?"

Smudge looked over his shoulder back towards the hallway. "Well, he's been here for a few days already, and by the way that those two act with him, they're most definitely not ready to let him go yet."

The black and white tom then looked back to Pippy and me, giving a shrug of his shoulders as he flicked his ears. "So, you two - it's looking like we may be sharing this nest with another cat soon."

I heard Pippy let out a gasp behind me, and I looked back at her to see her running up to stand beside me. "No way, how bizarre is that?" she exclaimed, exchanging yet another glance with me. She then nodded to Smudge, her eyes wide and eager. "Well, what do you think of him so far? Do you like him?"

I felt my eyebrows slowly raising as I watched Smudge hesitate. "Hm, let's see..." he began. "We got to chat for a moment while the Twolegs were grabbing his medicine. And... he seems nice enough..."

I exchanged yet another glance with Pippy, then looked back at

Smudge with a single cocked eyebrow. "But...?"

Smudge hesitated a bit more before letting out another sniff and sitting down. "Well..." he eventually went on, his paws shuffling back and forth. "Let's just say that I can already tell that his ego is larger than that cone around his head."

Pippy and I both burst into laughter at the older tom's comment, and the both of us were still catching our breaths by the time that Pippy spoke again. "Oh, gosh!" she purred, licking a paw and running it over an ear. "That bad, huh?"

I gave a small shrug. "Well, at least he'll maybe make things even more interesting!" I commented, genuinely intrigued by the thought of having to interact with an arrogant cat on the daily. *And if Smudge thinks he's arrogant, that's saying a lot. We're dealing with a serious biggity here.* "I'm up for it!"

I then nearly toppled over to the side as Pippy gave me a hard nudge. "Dusty, maybe he can help you catch Darryl!"

I then heard Smudge let out a snort, and I looked back at him to see him shaking his head, his yellow eyes full of amusement and confusion. "Who is this Darryl?"

I let out a small purr, realizing that I probably wasn't going to be able to get by without telling Smudge about the mouse, especially when it was something I was dealing with on the daily now. And thank gosh he is friends with cats that catch prey for fun! Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to hunt at all!

And just before Pippy and I could explain to poor Smudge about darn Darryl, a light knock came from the kitchen window above the sink. I flicked my ears, and looked up to see a very, very familiar silhouette sitting there.

The same silhouette always sat there at this time of day, and always gave that same light knock. The light knock that always turned my stomach upside down with excitement and nerves every time I heard it.

But for some reason, I found myself pushing down a bit of disappointment as I looked back down to see that Pippy was also looking up towards the window - her eyes narrowed and a big smirk on her face. "Oop, looks like you've got to go," my sister muttered to me. She then gave me a flick on the ear before putting her muzzle up to it. "Hey, I'll tell Smudge about Darryl as long as you promise me that you'll rip the new housecat to shreds when you tell Chloe about him."

I let out a purr of amusement and nudged Pippy's shoulder with a paw. "Deal." *And there'll be plenty of time for me to do that...*

I then let out a sigh, further trying to push down my reluctance as I finally leapt up onto the kitchen counter below the window.

Pippy followed me until she was just next to the counter on the floor. "So, what are you all going to do tonight?" she asked me, her head tilting to the side.

Unfortunately, my answer to my sister didn't require much thinking. "Well... what we usually do, I guess!" I replied, still having thoughts of other things I could be doing. *Running around the yard, having another go at catching Darryl...*

I then felt my heart flutter as another thought crossed my mind, and I remembered Pippy's suggestion from earlier. *Or catching another mouse out in the forest...*

But I had to push it all away. I shook my head quickly and finally continued on. "We'll probably just take a walk around the Twolegplace."

I then couldn't help but feel a twinge of fear as Pippy didn't immediately answer back, and simply stared back at me through narrowed eyes as if she could see right through me. "Cute," she murmured. "But... doesn't that ever get boring? I feel like you all do that pretty often."

I nearly let out an exasperated huff. *Oh, you have no idea!* I then nearly let out a hiss as I gave another shake of my head. *Shut up, Dusty!* "Well... no," I stammered after a few heartbeats. "No, not at

all."

I then forced myself to take a deep breath and let my fur lie flat, pressing myself in my own mind that the thoughts I was having were ridiculous. "I mean, these walks with her were my favorite thing to do when we first got together." *And they still are. What are you saying?*

Pippy gave me another long look through narrowed eyes before finally giving a shrug. "Well, sure," she then murmured. "Then you go on and enjoy your walk with your love, brother."

Then, after the two of us both lashed our tails to each other in farewell, Pippy turned around and began to pad towards the hallway, following Smudge. "But just throwing it out there, feel free to let me know if it doesn't work out with her..."

I whipped my head back around from the window to look back at my sister. "What was that?"

I then tilted my head in confusion as Pippy then broke into a run. "Nothing!" she shouted back at me before disappearing from my sight.

I let out a sniff and decided to shake off the comment, and let all of my confusion and worries try and disappear as I finally pulled back the knob in front of me, pushed open the window, and met the blue, brown-speckled gaze of my long time mate.

Chloe and I had first met when Pippy had decided to go on a little outing by herself in the Twolegplace. Her goal? I wasn't too sure, but we were a bit younger, and somewhat new to the area, so I suppose she had just wanted to explore.

I would have gone with her, but see, she left without saying a word - to Smudge's and my own dismay.

But my anxiety had quickly diminished when I met the cat that Pippy brought back with her - a pale ginger tabby she-cat with a white chest and ear tips. I wouldn't have said it out loud to her so soon, but just looking at her made my heart pound so loudly that I

could barely hear her soft, sweet voice when she talked to me. And when the three of us all talked for the first time, it was so clear that Chloe was such a kind, thoughtful cat that surely any cat would admire.

It was the first time that I had ever felt like this about any cat, but never let myself get my hopes up when it came to us getting together.

Chloe, Pippy and I had spent time together for only a couple of moons before Pippy seemed to want to pair us off - dropping subtle - but also not that subtle of hints, pushing us closer to each other, intentionally leaving us alone... It was pretty clear that my sister could tell that I had developed feelings for Chloe, and she was giving me the figurative... and literal nudge that I needed.

And sure enough, Chloe and I admitted our feelings for each other a couple of moons after that, and I felt that I was standing on the top of the highest tree when I'd found out that she liked me too. And to this day, we met every single night to spend time together.

And while we are incredibly different in personality... and the things that we like to do, Chloe is such a special she-cat, I thought to myself as I leaned my head forward to touch noses with her. *And that's enough.*

I then pulled away to meet Chloe's gaze, trying to tell myself all over again how crazy my thoughts from earlier had been.

Although... Pippy's words from just moments ago had affected me more than I would have liked. *But Chloe is so sweet, smart, gentle... need I go on,* I pressed, fighting back at myself. *And we've been together for so long. Just being with a cat like her is all that matters... no matter what we're doing, right?*

I then forced myself to lean my head forward to touch noses with Chloe. *Everything is going to be fine. Stop psyching yourself out.* "Hi, there," I meowed tenderly to the she-cat.

I then closed my eyes as Chloe gave me a quick lick on the cheek. "Hi, Dusty," she purred just before pulling away. "How are you tonight?"

"I'm just fine!" I replied to Chloe, leaping down from the window and landing swiftly onto the grass below. I then turned back towards Chloe, waiting to speak as she took her normal route from the window to the ground - onto the garden hose, to a stack of bricks pressed up against the nest, and then to the ground. "I'm a bit frustrated, though," I went on as I helped Chloe step onto the ground. "There's an idiotic little mouse inside of the house that I still have yet to catch."

Chloe gasped, and her blue eyes grew wide as we padded through the backyard. "Goodness gracious!" she exclaimed. "*Inside* of the house?"

"Yep," I replied, pawing at a small pebble as we walked past it. "And the little bugger - I named him Darryl - runs into his stupid hole just before I get a grip on him!"

"Well, that must not be fun!" Chloe meowed, flashing me a sympathetic look, then watching me as I leaped over my backyard fence. She followed just a heartbeat after. "Jeepers, I can't believe that you go around chasing creatures like that in your nest! Doesn't that make a mess? Don't you get tired?"

"Eh," I murmured, licking a paw and running it over one of my ears. "I don't care about a little mess."

I then gave Chloe a mocking-arrogant look as I let out a sniff. "And getting tired? Please! I'd chase Darryl around the entire earth if I had to!" The she-cat simply let out a *mrrow* of laughter and shook her head in amazement, so I gave her a light nudge on the shoulder as we began to pad alongside the fence. "Hey, who's to say that I have to do it alone? It'd feel even better to catch that idiotic Darryl if I did it with you!"

Chloe purred with amusement once again, and gave a lash of her tail. "Oh goodness, Dusty, I'm not so sure I'm suited for that! You should know this by now!"

"Aw, come on!" I further encouraged the she-cat, hope welling up in my chest. "It's so much fun, trust me!" I then gave her another light nudge. "Hey, it's not like we actually would have to chase him

around the entire earth!"

"I suppose not... but even then!" Chloe replied, her eyes wide with amazement as she seemed to observe my eagerness. "What do you even plan on doing with... Darryl one you actually catch him?"

I let out a small grunt and flicked my ears - genuinely not having thought at all about that. *And you'd think with how determined I am to catch him, I'd know what do with him once I achieve that...* "Huh... well, I guess I haven't been able to think that far ahead," I admitted to Chloe.

But I quickly thought of something that nearly made my mouth water. *Now that's definitely a motivator to catch him...* "I mean..." I eventually continued, letting my eyes flit every which way. "Maybe use him as a reward snack for my success?"

I flicked my ears in surprise as Chloe let out a gasp, and I looked back at her to meet wide blue eyes. "Oh my goodness, are you joking?"

I had to admit, I was surprised by her surprised. She almost seemed *taken aback*. "...No?" I meowed hesitantly. "No, I'm not."

"You'd eat a mouse? A living creature?"

"Well, he wouldn't be living anymore..."

I then felt my shoulders slightly sink with relief as Chloe then let out a purr, but her eyes were still wide with shock. "Wow, then I'll definitely leave you to the mouse-chasing then... and all of the other strange habits you've picked up! Like I said, I definitely don't think I'm suited."

She went on after we shared a brief *mrrow* of laughter. "I'm glad that you enjoy it though. I really am," she continued before proceeding to touch her nose to mine once again. "I really hope that you catch him one day! I can't wait to hear about it. Well... most of it."

"Well, thank you!" I tried to reply cheerfully, despite my weird, confusing feeling of disappointment began to well up inside of me

once again.

Chloe then pulled away, giving me a small nod.

And with that, there was silence.

I desperately tried to fill it up as we continued to walk together. "So, how are you tonight? What have you been up to?"

Chloe seemed relieved that I'd quickly tried to pick up a new conversation. "I am doing very well!" she answered happily. She then tilted her head to the side, seeming to think more deeply about my second question. "Hm... well, not too much," she eventually meowed. "I sat in the backyard this morning and watched the pretty, long and colorful fish that my female Twoleg keeps in our pond."

"Oh, you mean the koi?" I asked the she-cat. "Those are pretty." *But probably very tasty as well...*

"Definitely," Chloe agreed, giving me a nod before going on. "Hm... then I sat with my Twoleg while she watched that weird, bright square that's attached to the wall..."

"Gosh, that thing gives me a headache," I couldn't help but mutter as I shook my head.

"Oh, I find it relaxing! Then, after that, I played with some of my toys - I got a new one yesterday, and then I sniffed at some of the flowers blooming in the backyard..."

Chloe then trailed off of her words once again, brushing the tip of her tail against my cheek. "And... now I'm here, walking with you!"

I gave a small purr of amusement and licked Chloe's ear. "The highlight of your day, I'm sure," I teased. *But am I teasing? Geez, taking to a cat would definitely be the highlight of that kind of day for me...*

But I quickly shook off those thoughts, giving Chloe an inquiring look. *We'll change that.* "Speaking of which... where you do you want to walk tonight?"

Chloe let out a contemplative grunt as she stared ahead. "Hm... why don't we just take that path along the pond like we always do?" she suggested. "It's so beautiful, and you can see all of the lights of the Twoleg nests once you get to the top of the hill!"

I tried to ignore my tugging disappointment once again. "Yeah, you're absolutely right, but..." I then trailed off, Pippy's words from earlier echoing in my mind. *Doesn't that ever get boring? I feel like you all do that pretty often.* "It *is* something that we always do, so... how about we take a different route?"

"Oh... okay!" Chloe agreed after just a moment's hesitation. "What would you suggest?"

She had asked the question, but by the look in her eyes, I could already tell that she knew what I would likely say. *Wouldn't you rather go out to the forest? There's so much more space, freedom...*

I took a deep breath, deciding to take a chance at suggesting the place that I'd been fantasizing about for days now. "Well... would you maybe want to head the other way, towards the forest?" I meowed, gesturing towards the trees that were behind Chloe. "There will be plenty of trees, sure, but I'm sure that there would be some clear paths for us to take."

The more that I spoke, the more that my excitement and eagerness rose. So, I felt my heart sink a bit when I met Chloe's uncertain, wary gaze. "The forest?" she eventually meowed after a few heartbeats. She then began to shift her front paws back and forth. "Oh, Dusty, I'm not sure. I hate to admit it, but I don't think that I'd enjoy the dirt, the darkness... and what about predators?"

Unfortunately, it was just as I had figured. Yet, I pushed on. "All things we can deal with!" I exclaimed.

Chloe let out a small sniff. "Oh goodness, Dusty - you can, I'm not sure about myself!"

"Hey, I'll be there with you!" I further tried to encourage the she-cat. I then gave her yet another light nudge. "Come on! It'll be so neat, trust me."

As I took a step back, Chloe gave a shrug, still looking incredibly hesitant. "Well, I suppose you can't knock it until you try it!" she then meowed more brightly, though it seemed forced. And I was even more sure of that considering her next words. "But... how are you so sure it's neat?"

I furrowed my eyebrows back at her. "How are you so sure it's not?"

"Well... I suppose that I'm not."

"See, exactly!"

"Oh, well..." Chloe then murmured with a sigh. She then began to shake her head slowly, and I began to wonder if I should pull back considering how distressed she looked. "...I still don't know."

She then closed her eyes for a few heartbeats, and just as I was about to speak again, either to tell her to forget it or further motivate her, she opened her brown-speckled eyes and spoke again. "What's the sudden interest in the forest?"

Considering the thoughts that I'd had earlier, it didn't take me long at all to find how to answer Chloe. But... will she like the answer?

Despite the uncertainty to the answer of that question, I still gave her my honest one. "Well... I guess I've always wanted to take a visit to the forest, but... gosh..."

I then let out a sigh as I was taken back to several seasons ago, just days after Pippy and I had been adopted by our Twolegs, and had met Smudge. While the older black and white tom had given my sister and me countless wonderful memories as the two of us grew up, something I'd never forget were the stories that he told us every single night - stories of the wild cats that he knew of that lived in the forest beyond the Twolegplace. *And he even had a friend that left his home to become one of those cats... and now he gets to live under the trees, catch his own prey...*

I then shook my head quickly, pulling myself from these thoughts so that I could finish answering Chloe. "When Smudge first told me all about the cats that actually live out in the forest... I... I just

wanted to see what it's all like, you know?" I went on, as I looked up towards the trees. "Just to get a taste of what they get to experience every single day."

I then lowered my gaze to meet Chloe's once again, and I was surprised to see that her blue eyes looked dark and thoughtful. "I see..." she murmured. She then screwed her eyes shut, shaking her head quickly before speaking again. "That's really, really neat, Dusty."

She then took a deep breath. "It sounds like you've thought about this a lot - it's certainly not the first time you've mentioned it, or wanted to go out to the forest. Do..."

She hesitated once more before speaking. I felt my heart beginning to beat faster as I awaited her next words. "Do... do you actually want to be one of these cats?"

I flicked my ears, startled by yet another question that I hadn't ever given much thought. *But this question is a bit heavier than what I want to do with Darryl once I kill him...* "What? I... No!"

I then trailed off of my words, having to think for a moment. "No, no at all," I meowed tautly. "And... even if I did, I don't know where they live, anyway. Smudge says that they used to live near here, before either of us were born, but they left to find new territory after the monsters began to come to this area and build new nests."

"Oh, yeah!" Chloe exclaimed, her eyes lighting up just a bit. "I can tell that my Twoleg has some complaints about that..."

I then watched her, silently and full of anticipation as I watched her fall into hesitation once again. "Well, I suppose we can go to the forest."

I nearly let out a gasp with those words, and I felt myself taking a step back in complete shock. "What? Really?" I then let out a huff, stepping closer to Chloe once again as I realized that my enthusiasm may completely contradict what I'd just told the she-cat. "I mean, really? We... we can take the path along the pond... if you really want to!"

"No, no!" Chloe insisted, her eyes wide as she shook her head. "That's completely alright. You've gone along the pond with me countless times, when I'm sure you wanted to go to the forest."

That's true, but...

"So, let's go to the forest," Chloe then went on, sounding more certain of herself. But just a heartbeat after she spoke, she seemed to peer past me towards our normal route.

But after a moment, she seemed to jerk herself back to my attention. "I want to, Dusty. Trust me."

I want to, but I don't. And as much as I want to go to the forest...

I closed my eyes, letting out a long sigh as I forced down feelings of regret. "Hey, um... maybe we could compromise?" I suggested, taking a step closer to Chloe. "Well, in some form."

I then nodded towards the trees nearby. "I guess we don't have to go all the way into the forest. We could walk around the edge of the trees where it's lighter, and the Twolegplace is still nearby-"

Chloe followed my gaze, staring back at the trees that nearly loomed over us with their shadows as the sun continued to set. "Okay..." she nearly whispered. She then looked back at me, her eyes full of worry. "But you wanted to-"

I raised my tail in the air, giving Chloe a sharper look. "No, I insist," I pleaded to her, hoping that I sounded sincere. "It's closer to the forest than I could ever hope to be." When the pale ginger she-cat still seemed unsure, I took yet another step closer to her, trying to meet her gaze. "Really, I'm fine."

I was both relieved and disappointed at the same time when finally, Chloe seemed to give in, sighing as she let her eyelids close once again. "Alright," she breathed, stepping forward to lick my cheek. "Thank you."

"Of course," I murmured, touching my muzzle to the she-cat's head. "I... I love you."

"I love you too."

I then pulled away from the she-cat, meeting her gaze and looking deep into her eyes as I always did after we exchanged those words.

But this time, I felt that I couldn't look as deeply; that all of the words and thoughts that her eyes always revealed weren't as clear or comforting to me.

And for some reason, I had a feeling that my own gaze would be just as bleak.

But I just hoped to some higher power that I was overthinking it, and began to lead Chloe over towards the trees.

Chapter 2

I could feel the dusk sun's heat leaking through the window and onto my fur from where I lied on the couch in my housefolk's living room. Lately, that sun had been so hot that the grass had been dry when I'd gone out earlier, and the water in the pond nearby seemed nearly nonexistent. So, I'd mostly stayed inside since I'd gotten back last night.

Just a little ways in front of me and the couch, the TV - better known as the weird, bright square that's attached to the wall - was on, it's weird, garbled sounds not making any sense to me.

Towards the hallway, I could just barely hear Smudge giving our new housemate, Jerry, a house tour.

Basically, a lot was happening, and I barely cared to give any of it my attention at the moment. I was too deep in thought to move.

And it seemed that I'd already gone in a infinite amount of vicious cycles of worried, anxious thoughts by the time that I noticed Pippy approach me, her green eyes full of concern.

And just within a moment, she had leapt up onto the couch, and was lying next to me. "Hey, just talked to Darryl," she began as soon as she had settled. "He's wondering why in the world you're lying here on this couch rather than trying to kill him."

Not having the mental capacity to come up with a good answer, I simply sighed and rolled over onto my back.

At this, Pippy let out a contemptuous snort. "Dang, not one explanation? No reply I can bring back to Darryl? Not even a pity laugh for my terrible joke?" I then felt her flick one of my ears, and I felt her gaze burning into my pelt. "Dusty, what's wrong?"

I stared up at the ceiling, still not looking back at my sister. "I have a headache."

"Well, you are staring at the bright box on the wall."

I closed my eyes for a moment and sighed again, finally deciding to confide in Pippy. "True, but..." I then rolled back over so that I was on my stomach again. "...I have a lot on my mind too."

"Yeah?" Pippy inquired through narrow eyes, not looking surprised at all. "Well, it seems like you have since you came back last night." She then let out a sniff. "In fact, I'd say the last few nights. It's weird..."

I tilted my head, finally meeting her gaze. "Why is it weird?"

"Well, for a while, whenever you came back from seeing Chloe, or whenever she came to pick you up, those pale blue eyes of yours always sparkled so much that I was sure that they'd turn into puddles..." she answered me, her voice slightly teasing as she nudged me with her tail. "And to put it simply... now they're not."

I had to look away from Pippy again, hating more than anything that she had seemed to make observations that I'd been trying to ignore. *But this only means that I have more reason to acknowledge it and face it...* "No, they're probably not," I forced myself to meow. "And that's what's wrong."

Pippy slowly began to nod, and I could almost see the wheels turning in her head. "Oh, yeah?" she sighed. "What's going on with you two?"

I let out an exasperated huff, before finally letting all of my pent-up, confused feelings completely unleash. "I don't know!" I admitted to

Pippy. "That's the thing. Something has just felt... off. Things don't feel the same, and I don't like it."

I then managed to feel even more frustrated and dejected as thoughts and memories of the night before began to resurface. "I... I tried to follow your advice and do something a bit different with Chloe."

"Really?" Pippy pressed, her eyes lighting up. "That's great!"

I gave a small shrug and looked down at my paws. "Well, you'd *think*..." I began, bracing myself to give my sister the entire, horrible spiel. "I suggested that we go to the forest for our walk, rather than what we usually do."

Pippy simply nodded, prompting me to go on. "Right, right..."

"And she actually somewhat agreed - we ended up walking along the edge of the trees," I went on. "But... it was clear that Chloe wasn't enjoying herself, and to be truthful, I wasn't either. She wasn't enjoying these new surroundings, and not having the safety of the neighborhood and her own home, and I had to suppress the tug to actually go *into* the forest."

I then closed my eyes, almost reliving the amount of discomfort and dismay that I'd felt the night before. "It... it was just... off."

Pippy let out a huff, brushing a ball of tuft off of the couch with a paw. "Gee, taking a cold bath sounds more comfortable than that," she muttered.

"I unfortunately may have to agree with you, there," I muttered right back before letting out an exhausted sigh - because truthfully, I much rather would endure my housefolk trying to throw me into ice-cold bath water than relive anything that happened last night.

It wasn't like Chloe and I fought or anything, but it was just horribly clear how much the both of us were not enjoying our time, and wanting to be anywhere but where we were. We couldn't even seem to pass the time with any sort of conversation.

Things had changed, and I had no idea what to do about it. "Gosh,

Pippy. This stinks," I eventually meowed after a few heartbeats. I then gave my sister a nudge. "It stinks like your farts on the days our housefolk slip a piece of fish into our food."

"Whoa, and that really stinks," Pippy murmured, her eyes widening.

I actually let out a purr of amusement for the first time that day. "Well, I'm glad you're aware," I meowed a bit more lightly before letting out yet another sigh. "But anyway, I hate this situation. I mean, Chloe and I have been seeing each other for *seasons* now, why do things feel off?"

Shockingly, for once, Pippy seemed to genuinely think about my question, and was quick with an answer that wasn't teasing or just witty. "Hey, I mean, not every moment with someone you love is going to be absolutely perfect - especially when you've been together for so long," she pointed out. "It's almost inevitable that you're going to run into some sort of weird funk."

I was slowly nodding as my sister spoke, her words actually being quite reassuring. "I guess so..." I murmured, looking back at Pippy. "Well, what do you think I should do to fix it?"

"I mean... sometimes things like this can't necessarily be fixed, you just have to power through it together," Pippy answered, the words she needed to say seeming to flow out of her jaws. "If you are really meant to be with each other, and are meant to evolve together, then changes should be easy to endure, and differences you have should be easy to overlook."

"Yeah, that's... that's true."

"And it's clear that you and Chloe enjoy doing very different things. I mean, that's always been obvious - since the two of you first met, but... it just seems to be much, much *more* obvious now, for some reason," Pippy went on, her eye briefly flashing with sympathy. I then tilted my head, intrigued as she finally seemed to stumble and hesitate with her words. "And... as much as I hate to admit it, in your case, these differences seem to be pulling you further away from each other."

Pippy's words continued to be upfront, harsh, and honest, but they were all true. "Unfortunately..." I breathed, the sadness clear in my own voice. Then, as Pippy seemed to hesitate once more, I felt that I needed to prompt her on. "And, your point?"

To my worry, I could tell that my sister would have hesitated for many more heartbeats, and maybe wouldn't have spoken at all if I hadn't done so. "Well, I-I can't help but think..." she finally meowed, "if you both truly loved each other, would... wouldn't you be able to..."

She then cut herself off and shook her head quickly, likely to reformulate her words. "I-I mean, if it's truly such a battle, then do you really-"

A familiar knock then came from the kitchen window, cutting off whatever my sister had mustered up the courage to say. "Oh, there's Chloe..." I murmured, not sure if I was completely terrified or pleased by her arrival. I then looked back at Pippy from where I'd peered past her to glance at the window. "Um... what were you saying, sis?"

Pippy took one nervous glance at the window as well. "Uh..." But she then proceeded to give a dismissive shake of her tail. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

She then stood up and shook out her fur. "I'm probably wrong, anyway."

My heart began to beat a little faster. "Wrong about what?"

Pippy then gave a sharp shake of her head, continuing to give the dismissing gesture with her tail. "Don't worry about it, Dusty," she insisted to me. She then took a step closer to me, and for some reason, I noticed a glint of uncertainty in her eyes. "Listen, I'm sure that things will be fine between you two... okay?" she meowed, her words and tone luckily sounding more sure than her expression. "Like I said, pairs usually go through a weird phase."

She then put the tip of her tail on my shoulder. "I trust that you'll know how to handle it, and that you'll do the right thing in the

end."

I just stared back at Pippy for a moment, gratitude for her welling up in my heart. *Gee, when she's not being a total goof, or bouncing off of the walls, she can be pretty uplifting and wise.* "Thanks, sis," I meowed to her, touching my nose to hers. "I'm going to try!"

Then, after one last nod to Pippy, I finally leapt off of the couch and made my way towards the kitchen window, my fur tingling and my heart pounding with a new determination. *Pippy is right,* I told myself. *I do know how to handle this, and I will do the right thing. I am going to make everything okay again. Things will be exactly like they used to be!*

I immediately burst into a run - these new, optimistic thoughts making me feel as if I could pelt across the Twolegplace in just heartbeats. But I couldn't help but take a pause just as I was about to leap up onto the kitchen counter as my gaze fell on the backyard door - the very same place that Pippy and I had stood in front of yesterday, staring out at the trees beyond. *If it's not too late when Chloe brings me back... maybe I'll try and finally take a trip out to the forest...*

My heart felt lighter just at the thought of that possibility, but I had to shake it off. *There are more immediate and important tasks at hand, Dusty. Come on.*

I finally brought myself to jump up onto the counter, landing just in front of the window. And just as the light knock from moments ago had indicated - there was Chloe, sitting there on the ledge with her tail wrapped around her paws as she always did.

I took a deep breath, prayed for strength, and pulled back the knob, all while Pippy's words echoed in my mind once again. *Listen, I'm sure that things will be fine between you two... okay?*

Just after a moment's hesitation, I then finally opened up the window. *I trust that you'll know how to handle it, and that you'll do the right thing in the end.* "Hey, Chloe!" I then purred, touching my nose to the pale ginger she-cat's before leaping down to the ground.

I immediately whipped myself around to face the window, watching as Chloe took her steps down from the window to the ground. "Hi, Dusty," she meowed back to me. She then took her final small leap down to the ground from the same pile of bricks and began to pad towards me. "How are you?"

"I'm great!" I replied as I ran up to meet her. I then wrapped my tail across her shoulders as I began to lead her towards the back fence - the same exit we always took. "So, hey - I know that you were kind of uncomfortable walking next to the forest last night-"

I then nearly stopped in my tracks, my heart skipping a beat when Chloe actually let out a gasp, and I met her gaze to meet her wide blue eyes. "Oh my goodness, Dusty!" She exclaimed. "I really don't want you to think that!"

"Hey, it's okay!" I insisted to the she-cat, brushing my tail comfortably down her back. "I could tell, and I also could tell that it made our time together seem so weird and strange."

I then let out a snort, beginning to shake my head slowly as I looked back at Chloe. "I mean, that's not us, right?"

I felt one of my ears prick in surprise as Chloe closed her eyes, letting out a long sigh. "No..." she breathed. "No, it isn't."

I gave a single determined nod. Now, it was completely obvious to me that Chloe had felt just as weird about last night as I had, which now gave me all the more reason to make things right, and to do what I planned to do. "But I know how to fix it!" I went on cheerfully, taking a step back as I let Chloe jump up to and off of the fence first.

I then followed just a heartbeat later, actually having to take a moment to make sure that this is actually what I wanted to do. *Yes, it is,* I answered for myself as I landed on the other side of the fence. *This is what you've always known.* Chloe *is what you've always known. What reason is there for that to change?*

I then took another deep breath before meeting Chloe's gaze again. "So, how about we take our normal route - the trail along the pond

that you love so much?" I finally proposed to the she-cat. "Like we always do?"

Chloe's eyes widened once again as she looked back at me, to my surprise. "Jeepers... really?" She asked me, her paws beginning to shuffle back and forth as they always did when she was wary. "But Dusty, wouldn't you rather go to the forest?"

I tilted my head to the side and cocked one of my eyebrows. I was *determined* not to give in to her considerate nature. "Wouldn't you rather take the trail along the pond?"

"Yes, but..." Chloe then trailed off for a moment, seeming to let out a frustrated sigh. "You didn't answer my question."

I closed my eyes for a moment, having to take a moment to formulate an answer that would be honest, but not put a damper on my plan. "I... I'd rather walk somewhere that makes you feel comfortable," I insisted to her tautly, "And that doesn't make either of us feel uncomfortable or weird."

Chloe gave a small, shy shrug and looked down at her paws. "I suppose, but..." She then screwed her eyes shut for a moment before looking back up at me, her eyes wide with unease. "Dusty, are you sure?"

I gave another sharp nod before running up to the she-cat, pushing down my own wants that seemed to physically tug at my fur, and touching my muzzle to her head. "I'm sure," I tried to meow softly. *I could be more sure, but it's as sure as I need to be as long as things go back to normal... I think.*

I then pulled away from Chloe, trying to ignore the dismay that I hoped I was just imagining in her blue eyes, and then began to lead her towards our usual path, feeling more and more certain, comfortable and confident with each pawstep that I took. *At least, that's how I'm trying to feel.* "Come on, Chloe!" I tried to meow happily as I called back to her. "Let's go before it gets too dark. We can see if any of those koi fish are swimming around."

But I quickly came to a stop as I realized that only one set of

pawsteps continued to brush the grass. And sure enough, to my dismay, I looked over my shoulder to see that Chloe wasn't following me.

In fact, she hadn't even taken a single pawstep. "Chloe?" I quickly turned around and trotted back over to her. And this time, with each pawstep I took, I felt my heart sinking more and more.

I mean, I'd known Chloe for seasons now - I could always tell what she was thinking. Yet, for some reason, I still found myself asking her about it. "Chloe, what's the matter?"

I simply watched as she let out a sigh, her head beginning to shake slowly as she looked back at me. "You want to go to the forest, don't you?" She nearly whispered.

I hesitated even more with the second time she asked me this question, not being sure if I could even try and beat around the bush about it again. "Well, so what?" Is what I managed to come up with. "I'm fine going to the pond with you!"

Chloe then let out a huff, closing her eyes once again. "Sure, you may be fine with it, but it's not what you want to do."

I shrugged my shoulders, not seeing this as enough of a reason to not take our normal path... to not make things normal again and to fix what was wrong. "What does it matter if that's the case?"

"Because you shouldn't have to force yourself to do something that you don't want to do just to make me happy, Dusty," Chloe insisted to me, her voice rising and her gaze hardening more with each word she spoke.

But I still wasn't going to give in to it. "And you shouldn't either, Chloe," I demanded right back to her, taking a step closer to her. "Which is why I'm suggesting that we take the route that we usually do!"

"Dusty..." Chloe then let out another rougher, long sigh, closing her eyes yet again. "You shouldn't have to do that. It..."

She then brushed her tail against the grass, breaking her gaze away

from me. "It shouldn't have to be this hard."

I began to shake my head slowly in confusion and bewilderment. None of what Chloe was saying was making this better, making *me* feel better, and *none* of it was helping me to be able to fix things. I couldn't understand why the she-cat seemed to be fighting something that I was almost sure that she would agree with, and go along with. "...What?" I murmured. I then swerved beside her so that I could meet her gaze again. "Chloe, what do you mean? We're just having a rough patch, clearly. I mean, things used yo feel so special between us."

I then took another step towards her so that I could brush my tail against her shoulder, hoping that my words were finally getting to her. "We can get that again. We can fix it."

But despite all of my pushing, it was still clear to me that Chloe wasn't going to back down. She still wasn't looking at me in the eye, her brown-speckled gaze still fixated on the ground. "Oh, Dusty, I wish that was the case, but..."

She then let out yet another shaky sigh, taking several long moments to gather her thoughts while I waited, my ears pounding so much that I was worried that I wouldn't be able to hear what she said next.

And I actually felt a twinge of relief and excitement when she finally lifted her head to look at me. But sadly, there was still nothing but dismay and distress blazing in that brown-speckled gaze. "Dusty..." she finally went on, her voice frail and soft. "I feel like this a rough patch that is beyond fixing."

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. It was too horrible. I'd only hoped to hear these words in my own head, and eventually learn to ignore them. "Chloe, I have no idea what-"

"Dusty, please!" Chloe nearly yowled, startling me. "I know that you're smarter than this."

But the pale ginger she-cat quickly seemed to realize how harsh she had sounded, and her eyes briefly flashed with sympathy as she

stepped forward to brush her tail against my cheek. "And... I think that it's so, *so* sweet that you're trying to look past all of it and trying to bring things back to how they used to be, but..." She then trailed off for a moment, having to screw her eyes shut as she seemed to push back her own uneasy thoughts. "I can tell that both of us have felt this way for a while, but we've both been too afraid to come to terms with it."

Come to terms with it...

I already knew exactly what Chloe meant by this. I knew exactly what "it" meant. And she was absolutely right - I didn't want to come to terms with this at all.

But yet again, I decided to question it anyway, hoping that that would somehow change this horrible reality. "Come to terms with what?"

I took a deep breath, bracing myself for the answer that I knew was coming as Chloe stared back at me with her wide, sorrowful eyes. "We're drifting apart, Dusty," she whispered, her voice cracking. "You're right, things used to feel so special between us, but..."

She then hesitated before speaking again, and this time, I wasn't too sure what she'd say next. "But... things have changed," she went on after a few heartbeats. "...*You* have changed."

What?

I immediately felt my eyes widen at that statement, and I couldn't help but take a step back in response to that comment. "I've *changed?*" I asked in complete amazement. "How have I changed?" *Is this all my fault now? Oh, son of a duck...*

"Oh, please don't take it the wrong way," Chloe insisted to me, touching her tail to my shoulder once again, her eyes blazing with genuine reassurance. "You're still absolutely wonderful, and none of this change is bad."

She then looked away from me again, her gaze darkening once again. "It's just..." she murmured. "It's a change that makes me feel

guilty."

I raised my eyebrows, continuing to be utterly shocked by everything that Chloe was telling me, and I wondered why in the world that none of this had been brought up to me before.

But it only took me a moment to answer that. *Probably the same reason that none of my worries have been brought up to* her *before...* "Guilty?" I finally pressed to the she-cat. "Chloe, what reason do you have to feel guilty?"

Chloe still stared off to the side as she answered me. But she did let out yet another sigh, letting her eyes slowly fall closed. "I don't know what your future holds, Dusty," she began, her voice low and raspy. "But... I just feel like you seem to want a life beyond this place."

I flicked my ears in surprise. "Beyond the Twolegplace?" I questioned Chloe, recalling the conversations of the forest we'd had yesterday, and the days before that. "But I've barely said a thing about it! You really think that me mentioning the forest means that I want to leave my home to be there?"

Chloe then shifted her gaze away from the path beyond, and looked into my eyes once again, her own glittering with tenderness. "Dusty, things may be difficult between us, but that doesn't mean that I still don't know you better than any other cat does," she meowed softly before taking a step closer to me. "I remember when you first told me about what Smudge told *you* about the wild cats - the way that they hunt their own food, frolic freely, live in and explore the forest as they please..."

She then trailed off as she let out a sigh. "It's so different than anything that I ever fantasize about."

I began to nod eagerly back at her. "So, this is all about being different from each other? Not being compatible?" I asked Chloe, feeling a twinge of hope as I once again remembered my conversation with Pippy from earlier. We're meant to look past differences, right? "Chloe, being different doesn't matter in a relationship."

Chloe slowly nodded back at me. "You're right. It shouldn't matter, but..."

But?

"But if we really, really loved each other, wouldn't we be able to look past those differences, and enjoy being with each other despite those differences?"

With an internal, heart-breaking jolt, it snapped to me what Pippy had likely had been trying to tell me earlier, just before Chloe had arrived - it had been exactly what I needed to hear.

But good gosh, was it not what I wanted to hear - especially from the she-cat that I loved. "...You don't think that I do?" I eventually forced out. "You don't think that *we* do?"

"I... no, not as much as we could..." Chloe admitted, her voice shaking as she spoke, as if every word she was saying was physically hurting her. "But either way, Dusty, I don't think that we should. Living my sort of life doesn't make you happy, and me living your sort of life doesn't make me happy."

She then let out a sniff, gesturing to the trees that were lit beautifully by the setting sun behind them. "Well... the sort of life that you seem to want."

As realistic as everything Chloe was saying was, all I could do was sit there, shaking my head. "I-"

"Even if you never did end up going to life in the forest..." Chloe went on before I could even find my words. "Your spirit blazes in a way that is different than mine. I mean, you hunt in your house, you like to run and explore, and go out to the forest..."

She then took another step closer to me, finally letting her tail tip rest on my shoulder as she held my gaze. "I... I just feel like you have a different life to lead, and I am holding you back from it, Dusty."

Although it felt like every good thing in my life was collapsing before my very eyes, and as troublesome and discomforting as

Chloe's words were... *I have to be realistic,* I told myself. *While I truthfully don't know if I'll ever leave the Twolegplace, Chloe's words definitely aren't coming from a very outrageous place. But...*

I closed my eyes for a moment, hoping that my lids would somehow shield the pain that was welling up in my heart. "Chloe... I... I..." It took me a moment to gather my thoughts. *It's... it's all so much. How does any cat ever deal with this?* "But does this all mean that I have to lose you? Even if this is the case, it doesn't mean that I don't still care about you so, *so* much."

Chloe slowly shook her head, brushing her tail against my cheek once again. "That may be true, and..." she whispered to me, her eyes glittering for a moment. "I know that you care about me, Dusty - I mean, you were about to sacrifice doing something that you don't enjoy just to make me happy, but... I know that if we were to keep going forward, that's... that's *all* that it would be, and... I don't want to do that to you."

This time, I was the one that had to look away from the cat I was speaking to. *Wow... there was a reason that I was drawn to this she-cat all those moons ago. She is smart beyond her seasons. I've always known that. And it's always so hard for her to be honest, because she's worried about hurting others' feelings, so this means that this is really serious.*

I then took a deep breath, and looked back at the she-cat in front of me. *And I agree,* I then thought. *Everything she has said is wha I've been trying to avoid admitting this entire day... the spark between us is gone.* "You're right. You're so right, Chloe," I meowed to the beautiful, pale ginger she-cat, even though my heart now wanted to shatter every time I laid eyes on her. "And you're right in that you really do know me better than anyone else..."

I then couldn't help but step forward so that I could bend my head together with Chloe's. "That's what I'm going to miss about you so, so much," I then whispered to her. "Oh, Chloe, I'm so, so sorry."

Chloe pressed her head even closer to mine. "There is nothing to be sorry about, Dusty," she whispered back to me. "All that you've done is begin to find who you are, and unfortunately..."

She then finally stepped back so that she could meet my gaze again. "The more that you knew who you were and grew, the further that we grew from each other."

I stared back at her as I let out a huff. "Gee, it stinks that it has to work that way, sometimes."

Chloe sniffed, shrugging as she shook her head. "Yeah, it really stinks," she agreed. "Like Pippy after she eats fish."

With that comment, the two of us burst into laughter, and once it had died down, our gazes locked with each other once again.

I nodded to her, giving a lash of my tail. "Thank you so much, Chloe," I meowed softly to the she-cat. "For everything."

Chloe nodded back to me. "And thank you," she replied, her eyes sparkling. "You'll always have a special place in my heart."

"And you as well."

I then closed my eyes, letting Chloe's sweet scent flood through my nostrils one last time as she trotted forward to touch her nose to mine. I then watched, continuing to fight my immense feelings of guilt and sorrow as I watched her begin to pad in the direction of her own nest.

I flicked my ears in surprise when she paused for a moment, looking over her shoulder back at me. "Hey," she called back, "If you ever need anything, or want to talk - you know where to find me!"

I gave Chloe a look full of gratitude, along with a sharp nod. "I do," I meowed back to her. "And if you ever need me, I'll-"

I was interrupted by Chloe's snort of amusement. "Oh, I know where I'll find you," she purred teasingly back at me, giving me a wink. And after we shared another laugh, Chloe gave me another nod, her gaze softening once again. "Goodbye, Dusty."

I closed my eyes for a moment, having to brace myself to reply. "Goodbye, Chloe."

The pale ginger she-cat gave me one last warm look before finally continuing in her trek, walking along the trail until she made it to her own fence, actually leaping swiftly onto the top of her fence before disappearing onto the other side.

Goodbye, Chloe.

After a few moments of simply sitting where I was, I finally forced myself to stand up and return to my own home - jumping up and over my own fence, and then leaping up onto the window ledge so that I could crawl back inside. *Gee...* I thought to myself as I then stepped down onto the kitchen counter, reflecting on everything that had just happened. *How can someone feel so empty, yet free and fulfilled at the same time?*

I then let out a sigh as I then jumped down onto the floor. It was... it definitely was. I told myself, feeling more certain about these thoughts than any of the others I'd had tonight. It's just going to take me a while to let myself acknowledge it.

I then rounded the corner, and practically had to skid to a halt as I nearly ran into Pippy, whose head was bent down as she dug into her food.

When she heard my pawsteps, she flicked her ears in surprise and lifted her head, revealing her wide green eyes. "Hey!" She exclaimed, padding up to meet me. "You're back early!"

I pawed at some crumbs on the ground, and then sat down. "Yeah," I meowed as I wrapped my tail around my paws. "Just a bit."

"Well... how did it go with you two?" Pippy asked eagerly, her paws beginning to knead into the ground. "Did you talk? Did everything work out?"

I let out a sigh, letting myself fully lie down on the ground, and I gestured my tail as if to tell Pippy to do the same. "Well..." I began once my sister had settled down with me. " Many would probably say no, because..." I had to pause a moment before finishing, the pain of my encounter with Chloe still as fresh as it could be. "We decided to end things."

Pippy stared back at me, her eyes slowly widening again. "Oh my gosh, really?" Pippy replied, sounding genuinely distressed by the news. She then shifted herself closer to me and laid her tail across my shoulders. "Oh, Dusty, I am so, so sorry. Are you okay?"

I closed my eyes and let out another sigh, letting myself be comforted by my kin's touch. "It hurts. It hurts a lot, but... it was right," I admitted. I then opened my eyes so that I could meet Pippy's gaze. "It needed to happen, and I'm sure that's exactly what you were going to tell me before Chloe got here. So..."

I then took a deep breath, a new kind of reassurance and comfort spreading through me. "So, I would say that it all did work out." Because sometimes the best decisions are the hardest to make... it's a cliche saying, but a very, very good one.

Pippy's eyes were absolutely gleaming with pride and satisfaction as she stared back at me. "Smart brother. I'm proud of you," she murmured, giving me a sharp nod. "So, is there anything I can do to help you?"

I then tensed up, and I felt my fur slowly beginning to rise as I heard some quiet sounds of rustling come from the living room.

I very carefully and quietly began to rise from my spot. "Here's what you can do," I whispered, finally answering Pippy's question. "You can be quiet, stay still, and silently wish me all of the luck possible."

I then felt my eyes narrow down into slits as I then crouched down and began to sneak into the living room, cautiously trying to make my pawsteps as soundless as possible as I anticipated what might be there.

And sure enough, when I peered around the corner, what I had prepared to see was most definitely in my sights.

Hello, Darryl.

The little brat was currently on the couch, standing right where I'd been lying just earlier that day.

Ah, so first you think you can eat my pellets... and now you think

you can sit in my spot? I thought menacingly, a growl rising in my throat as I continued to make my way even closer to the small creature and braced myself to make my leap. Oh, how you're going to regret that!

Then, without a moment's hesitation, I finally leaped straight at Darryl, barreling straight into him on the couch before beginning to chase him around the living room just as we had done the day before - and many days previously.

But something was different this time.

The adrenaline rushing through my blood helped me to keep my speed, and this time, as I swerved and jumped over obstacles, I pretended that they were actually rocks, roots, sticks, and even large trees that I had to avoid if I were chasing prey in the forest. And once I was able to chase Darryl down to the kitchen, I paid close attention as the mouse swerved to one side of the kitchen table - the right side.

So, I tried to think quickly, practically throwing myself towards the other side of the table - the right side.

And just as I had hoped, it brought me face to face with the mouse. With *Darryl.*

I crouched down and prepared myself to leap once again, my heart pounding and blood pumping with resilience and determination. *Goodbye, Darryl!*

I let out a yowl and lunged straight at the mouse for the second time, and I practically felt light with excitement as I felt my claws sink into fur. *Yes!*

I acted as quickly as possible, pining the small creature to the ground with the paw. And then, not wanting to wait another moment to accomplish my goal, I used the other paw to give the killing blow.

And as the mouse fell still below me, I couldn't help but lift my head to the air and yowl with triumph. "Oh, heck yes!" I cried out. I

then bend my head down to pick up my new catch. "Boo-yah!"

Just a heartbeat later, Pippy was making her way to my side of the kitchen table. "Boo-yah?" She repeated, looking as if she was trying to hold back laughter. "Dusty, you've got to work on your choice of exclamations-" The black she-cat then cut herself off, her eyes falling on the creature in between my jaws. "Oh my golly gosh!"

I narrowed my eyes back at my sister. "Hm, you're one to talk," I muttered.

Pippy ignored my comment. "You caught Darryl!"

"I did!"

I then found myself growing slightly confused as my sister's expression suddenly darkened, as if she were falling into some sort of deep contemplation. "Interesting," she then muttered as she nodded her head slowly. "Very interesting."

I tilted my head to the side. "What?"

Pippy blinked, and shook her head dismissively. "Nothing," she quickly replied. "So, now that you've killed an animal, what do you plan to do with it?"

I furrowed my eyebrows as I dropped the deceased Darryl back onto the ground. The same question had been asked to me yesterday, and while I had the same answer as I did then, it now felt much, much easier to answer.

I looked back up at Pippy, licking my lips and flicking my tail towards the mouse that now lied between us. "You want to split this mouse?"

Pippy blinked back at me in shock. But interestingly enough, she didn't seem to be daunted by the question very long at all, and muttered, "You know what? I think I do!"

So, with that, the two of us settled down on the kitchen floor once again, and after we both gave each other a very nervous, yet excited look, we bent down to take a bite at the same time, and began to

feast on the gosh-darn stupid mouse that had brought me anger and frustration for days on end.

It didn't take Pippy long at all to chew her first bite. "Hm..." she mumbled after she had swallowed. "Darryl is delicious!"

I then swallowed mine, genuinely amazed that something that cat's can consume could taste this good. "You are not wrong, my friend!"

Then, we both ate in silence for just a moment, wanting to spend our time doing nothing else but devour the absolutely tasty meal that was before us. *There is no way that I am* not *going into the forest to catch us a wild mouse now!*

Pippy was the one to eventually break the silence. "So... does this mean that Chloe is single now, or...?"

I lifted my head quickly from where I'd been about to take another bite out of Darryl. "Huh?"

Pippy's eyes seemed to briefly flash with panic before she practically shoved her back into Darryl to take her next bite. "Nothing."

I let out a sniff as I finally bent down to take my next bite. "Hm, you have got to stop with that mumbling."

"Uh..." Pippy murmured, pushing what was left of Darryl towards me after she'd taken her bite. "We'll see about that."

I gave my sister an amused, concerned look before taking the last piece of Darryl. And as I chewed that last bite and let its deliciousness flow through my body, and the peace that I felt continue to flow through my mind. And as silence fell upon Pippy and I once again, I was given a moment to finally reflect on my current situation when it wasn't as fresh of a wound. *Wow, I never thought about it until after the events of tonight, but... now I realize just how much I was trying to cling onto this relationship with Chloe, despite how different things were... because of the special connection we'd once shared...*

I then felt myself shift uncomfortably in my sport just a bit. *But*

Chloe was right - I'm no ordinary house cat that wants to stay cooped up in a Twoleg nest all of the time.

I then took a quick glance towards my sister, who was currently staring outside at the backyard. *And to be honest, I don't think Pippy is either.*

I then returned my gaze to my paws as I fell deep into my thoughts again. *And as Chloe said - I may never even end up living this wild cat life that I find so cool. I mean, it daunts me as much as it would any other housecat!*

I then followed Pippy's gaze, looking out towards the backyard, the grass, and the trees... *But who knows? Adventure is ahead, and now I feel like I can fully chase after it!*

I then shifted in my sport slightly once again. *And when it comes to love, well... I'm certainly not ready to move on just yet...* I admitted to myself. *While Chloe and I weren't right for each other, and while I don't her lifestyle exciting, she is still a very kind, intelligent, and wonderful she-cat that would take me a bit to get over. But once I do, I'm sure that I'll be able to find a she-cat that is equally as such, and more, and that matches my own blazing spirit.*

The Enemy That Seems to Sleep

[image]

Read on to get a closer look into some of the disturbing dreams that haunted a certain young white she-cat, one that was for some reason very wise beyond her years...

Snowpaw's POV

Chapter 1

The sun was now gone, vanishing beneath the forest floor as I carefully padded across the ThunderClan camp, my blue eyes only just beginning to adjust to the darkness.

Nighttime had only just arrived, but with my stomach full of thrush after sharing a meal with Poppyfrost, and after a busy training day, I figured that a good night's rest was more than deserved.

I had just yowled a farewell greeting to my tortoiseshell foster mother, and was just fox-lengths away from the apprentices den when I suddenly came to an abrupt stop, pain shooting through my right side. *And even if I did stay up much later, this stupid wound wouldn't allow for that...*

I let out a sigh, sitting down in the very place that I stopped and rubbing my tail lightly across the large gash that was on my flank. The one that Swiftpaw, my fellow apprentice had given me just a few days ago.

I then let my head drop to the ground, another pain shooting through me, but not from my wound this time. *Well... unfortunately "fellow" is a bit questionable now...*

Up until that point, I had seen Swiftpaw as my best friend in the entire world. Sure, he could be short-tempered and emotionally

elusive, but we'd shared so many fun times together since we'd both been days old.

So, this training session, where he'd dug his unsheathed claws into my flank, when we were only supposed to be practicing, had been haunting me almost consistently since it had happened.

"Whenever you're ready."

Dustystorm's words - the words telling me that it was my call to allow Swiftpaw to go - had for some reason made me feel as scared as if he were sending a LionClan warrior on me.

For some reason, looking back at this dark gray tom that I had known since I'd first been brought to ThunderClan, made me scared. I didn't feel safe fighting Swiftpaw, and that I might as well be fighting that LionClan warrior.

At that point, there wasn't much at all he had done to give me any valid reason to think this way. *Yet...* I had told myself as I attempted to keep myself together, trying to ignore Swiftpaw's impatient gray-blue gaze burning into my skull. *The dreams I've been having lately say completely otherwise...*

I then lightly shook my head, pushing these thoughts away. *Hush, Snowpaw. They're just dreams,* I insisted.

I then took a deep breath, straightening myself up. *They're just dreams,* I repeated to myself. *And all Swiftpaw is doing is trying the Turn Belly Rake on you. Buck up.*

Although fear and apprehension still rippled through each and every one of my fur hairs, I finally gave Swiftpaw a nod, my words to him coming in a hoarse whisper. "Just go."

I then knew that there was turning back as Swiftpaw had then leapt right at me, very briskly making his way under me.

Well... and I'm one of those cats that tries to use the logic that the worst case scenario that you conjure up likely isn't going to happen, so I don't go into situations ever thinking that the worst case scenario is actually going to happen.

But this was one of those horrible times when you expect and fear for the worst thing to happen, and when I felt a horrible, sharp shooting pain pulse through my flank, I knew that it indeed had happened.

Swiftpaw's claws had been out.

The pain that seemed to prevent my entire body from doing anything for just a moment permitted me from being able to leap away or defend myself immediately, resulting in Swiftpaw sliding out from under me and leaping back at me again. *No!*

And I could only lie there, wincing and crying out in pain as Swiftpaw pinned me down and continued to slash at me. His scratches had all been quick, but deep and extremely unbearable. I knew that I couldn't ever defend myself if he went any further.

The amount of helplessness, hurt, betrayal, and fear that I'd felt was practically making my head spin as I watched Swiftpaw, the cat who'd once been my best friend and mossball partner in the nursery, raise his unsheathed claw once again.

So, I'd sent a million prayers to StarClan as I had *finally* heard Dustystorm's growl ring through the forest. "Swiftpaw! What are you doing?" the sandy-gray tom roared at the gray-black apprentice, this being the first time I'd ever heard him sound even remotely angry. "Get off of Snowpaw right now, she's hurt!"

I think he knew that.

Yet, he kept going.

I couldn't even look at Swiftpaw as I finally felt his weight lift off of me, and I felt the muscular shoulders of Dustystorm, and then Icecloud, gently help me up to my paws. I felt his gaze burning into me once again, but I didn't dare return it.

I then screwed my eyes shut, my body filling with both physical and emotional pain as I heard Dustystorm speak to the dark gray tom once again. "Way too far, Swiftpaw! Keep your claws *sheathed* next time!"

I then had felt the two older warriors begin to guide me as Icecloud spoke next. "Swiftpaw can get the stern talking to that he deserves later," the white she-cat meowed, her voice urgent. "Right now, we need to get Snowpaw to the medicine den. Come on."

And then, as Dustystorm and Icecloud helped me back towards camp. I felt myself feeling more and more physically sick. Not just because of the pain in my flank. Not even at the thought of Swiftpaw having attacked me.

It was the fact that he hadn't said a *word* since he had. It was the fact that he hadn't shown any concern. And the fact that he didn't even bother following us back to camp.

And me not being able to hear his lithe pawsteps behind us that had sealed the deal.

It all made me realize that he quite possibly had done all of it on purpose, just as I had originally feared he would. The pain of that almost hurt more than the wound itself.

But I will admit, the wound itself was hurting pretty darn badly when Dustystorm, Icecloud and I finally arrived at the medicine den to see Jayfeather. And although I had only been treated by the medicine cat a few days ago, I knew that I would likely never forget the rage that had blazed in his blind eyes that day.

When I had explained what happened, he had been absolutely infuriated, to my complete surprise. Not the kind of Jayfeather irritability. In fact, I had always known that Jayfeather was never necessarily angry, just short-tempered, cranky, and rude at times.

But angry would definitely be a way to describe him when he had vocalized his response to this situation. "I cannot believe that little piece of crowfood!" the gray tabby tom had hissed as he'd stormed to the back of his den to grab cobwebs. "What in the name of StarClan was he thinking?"

Despite everything that had happened with Swiftpaw, for some reason it'd been my first instinct to come to his defense. "It was battle training, Jayfeather! We-"

The medicine cat hadn't let me finish. "Swiftpaw clearly didn't know that, and if he did, he didn't care!" the tom went on as he began to dab the cobweb against my flank, very gently despite the rage that clearly was bubbling up inside of him. "And it's obvious that it's the latter. That foxheart wants nothing but to get his claws out at any opportunity possible, and he proves that more and more with each passing day."

"That is not true!" I demanded, trying to ignore my own thoughts screaming at me that all of Jayfeather's words were correct. "Swiftpaw is not the first apprentice in existence to accidentally unsheathe his claws in training."

I then let out an exasperated sigh as Jayfeather made his way to his herbs once again, showing no indication that he was acknowledging. "I mean, you can't be sure of anything that you're saying!"

I then had let out a quiet snort and flicked my ears, realizing how strange that it was that I was arguing with my medicine cat as if we'd known each other for seasons and seasons. In fact, this was one of the first times that I'd had a conversation with a tom that was more than a few words. *He seems to avoid me most of the time, but it's what he does with practically every cat, isn't it?*

It wasn't needed anyway, but Jayfeather didn't give me much time to ponder that concept. "Sure, I suppose that I can't," he muttered, his mouth full of marigold. He then quickly spat it out into his paw and began to spread it across my largest wound. "But you know what I can be sure of? Swiftpaw most definitely didn't *accidentally* give you several scratches along your flank, or *accidentally* roll out from under you just to leap at you again!"

I had to suppress a hiss as I angrily stepped away from the tom, not allowing him to finish his work. "Please, Jayfeather! That is the last thing that I need to hear right now!" I nearly cried to him, feeling my head begin to spin once again. "Don't you think that has echoed over and over in my head countless times over?"

I didn't fully look back at the medicine cat, but I could tell that his narrowing blind eyes were staring back at me. "So, you *do* think

that he did it on purpose, then?" he pressed, his voice eerily quiet.

I then screwed my eyes shut, shaking my head before turning to face Jayfeather once again. "I... no!" I forced out in a stammer. "I- I'm sure that this was a one-time thing. Swiftpaw... Swiftpaw clearly seemed upset by what he did."

"Oh, foxdung! You know, and I know that you're just lying to yourself!" Jayfeather exclaimed, his voice rising again. He then hardened his gaze, taking a step closer to me after throwing his marigold poultice to the ground. "Swiftpaw is a monster, and you are only putting yourself in danger by being around him, Snowflight!"

The medicine cat's eyes then widened, and he let out a seemingly frustrated growl as he closed his eyes. "Snowpaw," he corrected himself. "You shouldn't be around him, Snowpaw. He's dangerous."

I quickly shook off the medicine cat's clear mistake, and it immediately was shoved to the back of my mind. For, there was something else that I was focused on - not just defending Swiftpaw in this moment, but the reason why I was trying to defend the fact that Swiftpaw wouldn't do anything malicious on purpose, *ever*. *The reason why I've already committed to still being his friend, even after this training session.*

I took a deep breath before finally replying to Jayfeather. "Even if you were right, I... I'm not doing that." *Because it's becoming more and more clear that these dreams that I'm having aren't just... dreams - all of these dreams that I've been having since Swiftpaw and I first became apprentices... and because they aren't just dreams, I have to do something about them, don't I?*

I then slowly turned to face the medicine cat once again, meeting his solemn, dark gaze. I felt scared, but more certain than I'd felt in days. "I... I refuse to do that. I can't."

Jayfeather simply stared back at me with the same dark, unreadable look for many, many uncomfortable heartbeats before finally turning away from me to pad to the back of his den. And I almost wondered if I'd just imagined the gray tabby tom murmuring an

almost inaudible "I know" in response.

But I didn't linger on it, and simply looked back towards the entrance to the medicine den, watching as the sun began to set that day. "I can't..." I repeated, just to myself this time.

I can't.

I pressed these two words into my head as I finally stood up from where I sat in the middle of the camp, giving a small shake of my fur before continuing to walk once again. *Despite how much these dreams are scaring me, and despite how much they're making me fear Swiftpaw, I can't let him down.*

It was what I'd been trying to tell myself more and more with each new dream I'd had each night - dreams that most certainly depicted the kind of Swiftpaw that Jayfeather had seemed to want to see as real - a heartless, malicious, and downright terrible cat that anyone would hate and fear. They felt more and more real every night, and I'd even wake up fearing the apprentice whenever I saw him for the first time that day.

And although that training session a few days ago had allowed me to see potential for that kind of Swiftpaw, I couldn't let the horror of that make me run away from him or these dreams. As I had insisted to Jayfeather, I *refused* to.

I then took a deep breath, beginning my trek towards the apprentices den once again as my heart began to well up with determination. *Although some cats like Goldenshine may not know it yet, they are counting on me. Even Swiftpaw himself. I can't let them down.*

Chapter 2

I could hardly keep my eyes open by the time I had finally arrived to the apprentices den, its entrance practically looking like the gateway to StarClan.

But just as I was about to crawl in and settle in my nest, I was startled as two shapes came bowling out of the nursery out of the

corner of my eye. I quickly shifted my gaze in the direction of the motion, immediately recognizing two out of the three pelts of the newest kits in the Clan - Wrenkit and Lightningkit.

And I couldn't help but let out a purr of amusement as I heard Thornclaw's call from inside of the den. "Wrenkit! Lightningkit!" their father exclaimed. "Get back inside!"

Thornclaw's golden brown tabby pelt then came into sight as he crawled out of the nursery and bent his head down to pick up Wrenkit, who had been pinning Lightningkit down. "Lilypetal still needs to feed you two, and then it's time to go to sleep."

Wrenkit let out a sigh, practically going limp under his father's grip. "Aw, okay."

Lightningkit then very clumsy leaped back up to his paws, his little feet slipping against the stone ground a few times. Once he was fastened on all four, he stood up straight and stared determinedly up at his father. "But sleep is for the weak!"

"And it's also for those who want to function normally," Thornclaw purred, looking affectionately down at his black and white son and nuzzling his head with his tabby tail. "Come on, you two can beat each other up tomorrow."

I then watched as Thornclaw finally turned around and carried Wrenkit back inside of the nursery, and I had to suppress another purr as I shifted my gaze to Lightningkit, who was rolling his eyes and letting out a sigh. But nevertheless, his eyes were warm as he then began to follow behind his father, clearly not really being phased by the light tormenting.

But just as he was about to disappear beneath the brambles, his yellow eyes managed to brighten even more as he glanced to his side, his gaze landing on where I was standing. "Oh!" the little tom exclaimed, lashing his sleek tail in greeting. "Hi, Snowpaw!"

Before Lightningkit could say anything else, his brother's yowl cut him off from the nursery. "Lightningkit, come on!"

I then recognized the meow of ThunderClan's newest queen, Lilypetal. "There's not going to be any left for you!"

"Ha!" Wrenkit and Lightningkit's sister, Emberkit then exclaimed. "Lightningkit's going to starve!"

Lightningkit let out a small purr as he jerked his head back towards the nursery. "Hold on! I'll be right there!" He then shook his head slowly as he looked back at me, his eyes concerned and curious. "Hey, how is your wound doing? You got hurt the other day, didn't you?"

I nodded to the tom, him definitely not being the first of my Clanmates to show me concern. "Yes, I did, and it definitely has been bothering me, but I'm doing much better!" I answered Lightningkit. *Well, I think...*

I then glanced down at the wound as I let out a sigh. "But geez, do I wish it would just go away! It's already beginning to scar..."

I then looked back up at Lightningkit to see his yellow eyes glinting with sympathy. "Aw, dang!" the kit sighed. "I'm sorry, Snowpaw!"

I was almost amused by the amount of genuine worry that Lightningkit seemed to be showing, almost more than what was needed. "That's okay, Lightningkit," I began to reassure him. "I-"

"Lightningkit, come on!" I then heard Lilypetal call out again. "I'm not actually going to let you starve!"

"Wow, that's inspirational," Thornclaw then purred.

Lightningkit also purred, giving another lash of his tail. "Coming!" he called back to them once again before giving me an eager nod. "Goodnight, Snowpaw!"

The little black tom then finally began to trot inside of the nursery, but I flicked my ears in surprise as he paused once again and looked back at me, his eyes sparkling in the moonlight. "By the way, I think that you look cool with the scars!"

I flashed the tom a warm look, genuinely being touched by the

comment before watching him finally crawl into the nursery to join his parents and siblings. And once he was out of sight, I finally crawled into my own den.

And once I was inside, I almost immediately flinched as my eyes fell on the dark gray pelt of Swiftpaw, his pelt practically blending in with the darkness as he slept in his own nest. He seemed to sleep as calmly and as peacefully as any normal apprentice would - the rises and falls of his flank slow and consistent.

I mean, no cat would ever guess that he'd inflict a wound on his Clanmate on purpose. *Because he wouldn't, right?*

I was almost too exhausted to ponder this question. I mean, I unfortunately likely knew the answer, but I was too exhausted to even try to dodge it.

But even if I was more awake, I likely wouldn't, anyways. *I'll have more than enough to ponder and dodge when I wake up tomorrow morning,* I only half-joked to myself as I lied down and got settled in my own nest. *Great StarClan, how I wish that I could have just one night of peace of these dreams. They're so scary... yet I can't ignore them. I can't ignore them because they're scary...*

I then adjusted myself into a position that was comfortable. B*ut please... just one night where I can pretend that my friend isn't slowly turning into a cat that I fear... a cat that many fear...*

I then finally let myself close my eyes. *Please...*

But I already knew that I was kidding myself as I quickly began to drift off into sleep.

And sure enough, I opened my eyes and "awoke" to immediately find myself in a place that I'd woken up in many times before...

A clump of brambles, with leafless trees that towered over them, and dry grass beneath me.

By now, I knew exactly where I was going here.

Without much hesitation, I began to move forward, every pawstep

familiar.

And as well as knowing exactly where I was going, I knew exactly what I was going to find once I'd gotten to my destination- the end of these clumps of brambles.

My thoughts were quickly confirmed when I began to hear voices, ones that weren't intelligible until I found my way to this certain hollow that marked the end of these bushes.

Two voices - one that I knew very well, and one that I had never heard before until I'd started receiving these dreams.

The one I was unfamiliar with spoke first, uttering words that always sent a chill down my spine, but I'd already heard many times before. "I am very, very proud of you, Swiftpaw," the husky, menacing voice meowed. I then heard him let out an amused snort. "Well, I'm sure that you know that."

I then nearly winced as the voice that I knew very well replied - it made my stomach twist every time I heard it for the first time in one of these dreams. "Thank you, Ashfur," Swiftpaw's equally husky and menacing voice murmured in reply. "And yes, I know that. But I didn't need your approval for that."

This unfamiliar tom.... *Ashfur*, let out an eerie chuckle. "Hm, good," he then muttered. "I was going to say...."

"Well, it's only obvious that you'd be proud," I then Swiftpaw go on. I then heard him take a few pawsteps forward. "Now, enough with the sappiness, Ashfur. We're wasting time here. Are you going to teach me a new fighting move, or what?"

I then narrowed my eyes as Ashfur simply purred with amusement in response.

And I had to admit that I agreed with Swiftpaw's next words. "I don't see what was very funny about that."

I then flicked my ears, my heart beginning to race as I realized that this conversation was taking a very different direction than it usually did when I eavesdropped on the two toms. But nevertheless,

I pushed on and continued to listen. *Clearly, this has significance...*

"And I find that a little sad, Swiftpaw," Ashfur purred in response to the younger tom's words. "Don't you realize that I've taught you everything that I have?"

With a deep breath, and dread continuing to well up in my bones, I pushed myself to finally peek in between the brambles, the hollow in front of me finally in my sight.

And just as I had assumed, there was this "Ashfur" that I'd already heard and seen many times, but had never met in the real world. *And it's a good thing that I haven't...*

But despite my immense fear of this tom, I watched him as he continued to speak to Swiftpaw, who I assumed was in front of him, but couldn't immediately see. "You're at your peak, Swiftpaw," Ashfur went on, beginning to pace around the hollow, his blue eyes dark and full of satisfaction. "You've become exactly what I've been training you to be - a tough, stone-cold, clever, vicious and powerful cat. You're far from being the soft, fragile, *pitiful* little piece of fluff that you were when I first met you."

I then took a long, deep breath, finally gathering the courage to shift my gaze from Ashfur and risking myself being seen in order to take a glance deeper into the hollow at what I couldn't initially see.

But as soon as I did so, I felt my eyes widen and my mouth drop as my gaze fell on what I could only assume to be Swiftpaw - Ashfur had addressed him as such.

But otherwise, I would have hardly recognized the cat in front of me.

He was almost as big as Ashfur, if not the same size. His muscles rippled beneath his fur all over his body. His dark gray fur was ruffled and practically covered with battle scars that flitted along his flank and shoulders. And he had large, sharp claws that glared even in the darkness.

I felt dizzy, and Ashfur's words were only fog as he eventually spoke

again. "You've become a true warrior, Swiftpaw."

Just when I thought that I couldn't stand the sight of my friend anymore, everything around me disappeared, and was quickly replaced with the surroundings of another forest.

Although I immediately recognized the looming trees, lush grass, and large bramble bushes of ThunderClan territory, it still made my legs begin to tremble and my heart begin to pound like it never had before. *This is new... I've never dreamt of this before...*

But I had no choice but to power through, I knew that. So, I tried to straighten myself up and simply process the sight in front of me.

Several puddles were developing as the ThunderClan forest was becoming covered in rain, and this familiar hollow that I was currently in had already become what any cat would call a mudbath.

And right in the middle of this hollow were two cats - one dead, and one alive.

I practically had to swallow back my horror as my eyes fell on the cat lying on the ground - from what I could see, it was a white she-cat who had practically been ripped to shreds.

But it was somewhat hard to tell because of the cat in front of her - a larger gray tom, panting as he continued to loom over and stare down at her corpse.

I tilted my head to the side, my terror being able to subside just a little as curiosity took over, and I tried to figure out what I was looking at, and why.

I then flicked my ears as something came to mind that somewhat made sense. *Wait a moment, am I witnessing Snowflight's death?* I asked myself, that possibility making more and more sense the more that I processed what I was looking at. *And the gray cat is Ashfur, isn't it? I was told that he was the one to kill her, out of revenge for Lilypetal chasing him back into exile!*

I then had to shut my eyes for a moment as it all continued to come

together. *Great StarClan, if Swiftpaw really is training with that mouse-heart... I'll-*

I then broke my own thoughts off, not being able to gasp and take a step back as Ashfur very abruptly turned around to face me, simultaneously stepping aside to further reveal Snowflight lying on the ground.

But I felt my heart practically shoot up into my throat as I realized that it wasn't Snowflight at all. *I was told that Snowflight was pure white...*

But this she-cat had gray paws and ear tips. And when I met Ashfur's gaze, I didn't meet the bright blue eyes that had been engrained into my mind every time I saw him in that creepy forest hollow. Rather, gray-blue eyes. Those gray-blue eyes that I'd probably looked into more than many other cats.

No... I thought, my fur slowly beginning to rise as I continued to step away. *No, no, no... please, no...*

Then, without hesitation, this absolutely horrible, appalling and dreadful Swiftpaw entity leaped straight at me, just as he had done in the forest during that training session that had changed everything.

And I couldn't help but let out a yowl of immense terror as I felt my back hit the ground, and Swiftpaw's large, sharp claws sink into my shoulders. And for a moment, it all felt so terribly real and vivid, and that I was sure that I was actually experiencing my final moments - my final moments of my life in the paws of someone that I used to *trust* with my life.

And those blazing gray-blue eyes of this cat, full of nothing but malice and malevolence, were the last things that I saw before I was yanked away from everything around me once again, and my eyes flew open.

And this time, I found myself in the apprentices den, safe in my own moss nest.

And although ThunderClan was currently enduring the middle of leaf-bare, I found that I was nearly sweating and panting. I might has well have genuinely experienced everything that I'd just experienced in my dreams.

But as exhausted, fearful, and shaken-up as I was, I had also never felt so relieved. It was just a dream, Snowpaw. I tried to tell myself as I caught my breath. *You're safe, you're not in danger, and none of what you experienced is real. And most importantly...*

I then took a deep breath as I began to roll over onto my back. *Swiftpaw would never, ever try to kill you like that.*

But all of my reassuring thoughts immediately disintegrated as I finally rolled over on my back to meet the same gray-blue eyes that I'd seen in my nightmare just moments ago. The gray-blue eyes of the cat had been about to *kill* me.

Suddenly overcome with fear, and still not fully processing my surroundings after sleep, I couldn't think to do anything else but let out an earsplitting yowl as I leaped up to my paws. I felt my fur beginning to bristle as my claws began to slide out of their sheaths.

But after a few heartbeats of simply standing like that - seemingly preparing to defend myself, I noticed that Swiftpaw actually seemed in no-way geared up to fight, and only stared back at me with horrified, wide eyes before proceeding to anxiously whip his head back and forth.

"Snowpaw, what in the name of StarClan is wrong with you?" he hissed quietly to me. "You probably just woke up every creature from here to the mountains!"

I simply stared back at Swiftpaw for a few moments before shaking my head quickly, fully coming "to" and realizing that I genuinely wasn't in danger, and all of the reassuring, yet groggy thoughts I'd had,actually held true.

I took a deep breath, and let my fur lie flat once again. "My goodness, I'm sorry," I breathed, my ears suddenly feeling hot with embarrassment as I shook my head slowly. "Bad dream."

I tried to push back my nerves once again, realizing that I was going to have to lie about this "bad dream" to Swiftpaw, and likely dodge many pressing questions that I'd have no idea how to answer.

And Swiftpaw was a smart cat - sometimes clueless about the most obvious things, but nevertheless, quite intelligent... and *very* easily skeptical. "What kind of dream brings you to yowl at the top of your lungs?" the tom asked me after a quiet snort.

I began to shift my paws back and forth nervously as I gave Swiftpaw a shrug. "You just scared me," I answered quickly, my heart pounding in my ears. "Wouldn't you be frightened to wake up to find a cat's gaze burning into you?"

I then felt my stomach twist as I watched Swiftpaw's eyes slowly narrow down into two blue slits. "That seems to be your excuse every time," the tom then muttered.

I had absolutely no idea how to respond to that. How could I? The tom was right. But obviously, I was terrified to give him any of the truth, and couldn't admit that at all. At least, that's what I assume...

"Anyways, you seemed pretty distressed *while* you were asleep too," Swiftpaw went on before I was able to come up with an answer. And I forced myself to stay put as he took a step closer to me, his head tilting to the side. "What was that all about?"

I continued to stand, speechless, as I tried all of my might to come up with an answer, *and to keep my darned fur flat! Snowpaw, calm down!*

"Are you still having weird visions and thoughts about medicine cat things?"

I nearly let out a sigh of relief, finally being given an "out" to this interrogation. *There's that oblivious Swiftpaw that we all know and want to strangle with our tails!* "Yes, yes. That's it," I stammered, my words not being a complete lie - the strange and ambiguous medicine cat dreams actually being something that had been bugging me lately.

I began to shift my paws back and forth again, flitting my gaze all over the den surrounding us. "Great StarClan, do they give me trouble..."

Despite Swiftpaw's skeptical grunt and his dark, questioning gaze, he finally seemed to give in. "Alright, then..." he muttered before turning away and beginning to leave the den, to my confusion. "Come on, we have our warrior assessment this morning."

And with those words, my heart seemed to drop down to my stomach. "Warrior assessment?" That concept seemed too outrageous to me, that I was sure that Swiftpaw was just trying to pull my tail. "Today?"

Swiftpaw stopped in his tracks and looked back towards me. "Yes?" he replied, revealing his concerned blue eyes as he fully turned back to face me. "Icecloud and Foxleap told us this at dusk yesterday."

Oh my StarClan.

I shook my head once again, realizing more and more just how much my dreams had affected me beyond sleep - just how discombobulated they caused me to be. Swiftpaw was completely right - Foxleap and Icecloud had talked to us about it yesterday, and we were being assessed this morning. *And I completely forgot.*

I let out a huff, letting my eyes close for a moment. *Goodness, I don't know how much longer I can take this...* "Right, right."

Suddenly feeling a bit defeated, I let out a sigh and sat down in my nest. "That's right."

I then looked back up at Swiftpaw to see him still looking back at me, his eyes glittering with amusement. "Um... are you coming?"

I let my eyes close and sighed once again. "You go on ahead, Swiftpaw," I breathed, simply just needing to take a moment to compose myself before taking on the day. "I'll be out in a moment."

Swiftpaw then sniffed, cocking his head and staring at me for a few moments before finally giving me a nod. "Alright, then."

I then finally released one huge, relieving breath as I watched the last of Swiftpaw's dark gray tail vanish from my sight, and I was left in the den, alone.

Although, I wondered if that was necessarily a good idea. I*'ll drive myself crazy if I just sit around letting these dreams... nightmares eat me alive. But at the same time... how will I ever know what they mean if I try to live my life normally and ignore them?*

I then began to pace around the den. *They're too unsettling, too vivid, and too repetitive* not *to mean something, I know that.*

I then paused and glanced back towards the den entrance, the same place that Swiftpaw had just disappeared through. *And unfortunately, I think what they mean is actually pretty obvious.*

I then had to hold back a whimper as I began to pace once again. *Oh, StarClan! Please make all of this clear to me soon. And if not clear... just clear enough. Because if I've got this right at all... the Swiftpaw I was just speaking to is not too far off from the Swiftpaw that I just saw in my dreams.*

I then closed my eyes. *And if he's not, he will be,* I then thought grimly. *That's why I have to be next to him to stop it from happening, but... I have to know how to do it.*

I then took one last deep breath, finally pushing myself to move forward and leave the den. *And the only way I can do that is to endure these dreams, and face this Swiftpaw that I hope that I never, ever have to face in the real world.*

Star-Crossed Lovers

[image]

Read on to see two medicine cats turned lovers, divided by life and death, reunite after moons and moons of struggle, confusion, and grief...

Jayfeather's POV

Chapter 1

The strong and sweet scent of marigold flooded through my nose, nearly knocking off my concentration as I intently spread a poultice across one of several... *several* wounds that I'd had to treat that day.

"There you go," I muttered to Squirrelflight, who I had felt flinch when I'd touched my paw to her flank. I then cleared my throat before licking the remains off of my paws. "Take it easy for a little while so that it can set. If the pain still persists tonight, let me know." *The amount of times I've had to say that recently... if I were someone else having to hear me say that over and over, I'd strangle myself with my own tail!*

"Thank you, Jayfeather," Squirrelflight then purred, and although I couldn't see it, I could practically feel Squirrelflight's green gaze burning into my fur. I was tempted to continue licking my paw just so I wouldn't have to acknowledge it.

But nevertheless, I let out an almost inaudible sigh and glanced in the dark ginger she-cat's direction as she spoke again. However, I had to keep myself from shifting uncomfortably. "I hope you know how proud I am of you," Squirrelflight, the she-cat that I had once known to be my mother, went on. "I don't know where ThunderClan would be without you and your brilliance."

I simply gave the she-cat a small nod in response, flashing her a grateful look that she probably couldn't see, or recognize. *And I'm*

fine with that.

I then nearly let out a sigh of relief as I heard Squirrelflight finally get up to her paws. "So, where is your mother?" The older she-cat then cleared her throat, and she seemed to shake her head quickly when I flicked my ears in surprise. "Sorry - where is Leafpool?"

For some reason, I felt a small wave of guilt at the thought of Squirrelflight having to correct herself in that way. I hesitated for several heartbeats before replying to her. "Leaf..."

I then closed my eyes, letting out a sigh before flicking my tail towards the entrance to the medicine den. "...My mother is over by the camp entrance," I finally forced out. "Don't go over there and waste her time; she's helping Briarlight with her exercises."

Although I didn't want to take back what I had said, and *how* I had said it, I couldn't help but look away again as I felt a huge rush of affection and pride come from Squirrelflight's direction. "Will do," she then nearly whispered before beginning to pad out of the den. "Thank you, Jayfeather."

I only grunted in response, but turned back towards the den entrance as Squirrelflight made her way out. I ruthlessly was trying to push down the affectionate and warmth that was threatening to grow in my heart. *How differently this encounter would have gone just a half moon ago...*

Then, once I was sure that Squirrelflight's dark ginger tail had disappeared through the bramble screen of the medicine den entrance, I let out a long, frustrated sigh as I turned to pad towards the back of my den. *I was filled with so much more anger, and so much more resentment at what Squirrelflight and Leafpool had done to deceive Hollyleaf, Lionblaze, and me...* I reflected. *But after all that has happened since the secret came out about our real parents... I've learned to move past that grudge that we held against them for so long. It brought more bad than good in a lot of ways.*

I then nearly had to hold back a hiss as I came to a stop right in front of my herb stock. *That whole thing has become the least of my worries anyway, and not necessarily by choice...*

Letting out a huff, I then began to sniff around the piles of herbs, which hadn't been organized at all that day. *Also not by choice...*

As the cats of ThunderClan had flowed into the den throughout the day, I'd only had enough time to grab what I needed from the store to get cats in and out as quickly as possible. Now, all that was left as the sun was beginning to set was a big, *horrendous* mess, and the smells of all the different herbs were actually beginning to blend together.

Praying to StarClan that another cat wouldn't stroll in, complaining about their battle wounds, I then began to sort the jumble of herbs. *If another cat walks in here, I'm just about ready to just grab a pawful of herbs, throw it at them, and tell them to pick what they want and treat themselves!*

If I hadn't made it obvious enough already (if not, where is your mind?), the medicine den had been very busy since the Great Battle, and I had probably seen every cat in ThunderClan at least two times. The battle had just been about a quarter moon ago, but it had like much, much longer.

And when I wasn't treating my Clanmates' wounds - some simple scratches, and some nearly fatal - my mind had been swirling with even more exhausting thoughts - thoughts of the countless amounts of evil spirits that had poured into the ThunderClan camp, my powers that had felt so overwhelmingly strong, and seeing cats that I had known for moons and moons go to StarClan - including Firestar, my kin and ThunderClan's leader, and Hollyleaf, my own sister.

I could still hardly believe that the two of them, among many others, were gone, all because of a pointless grudge that many *dead* cats felt that they needed to express through violence.

But despite that, and despite all of the almost unbearable grief and anger that I still felt every single day, I still tried to remind myself of the good; the Clan now thrived under new leadership - my foster father, Bramblestar, with his deputy, Lilypetal. The two definitely made a great team, but also individually brought so much hope and spirit that the Clan sought out now more than ever.

And Leafpool was also helping me in the medicine den - only after I had reluctantly allowed her to. But somehow, I'd found it in my heart to forgive her.

Things were just fine, and I truthfully hadn't been able to say that in a long, long time.

But that thought quickly burned to ash like a wildfire rushing through a forest when I suddenly heard movement behind me, and what felt lick a small rock hit the back of my head.

I let out an enraged hiss as I touched one of my paws to my head. "What in the name of-" I then whipped myself around as I continued to hiss, and I could feel my lips curling back into a snarl. "Who threw that?"

It only took me a moment for me to answer my own question, and I let my fur lay flat again as I quickly recognized the scent that flooded through my nose, and the purr that I could hear coming from the medicine den's entrance. "Goldenshine! What in the name of StarClan is wrong with you!?" I scoffed at my friend, my tail still twitching with irritation. "What was that?"

The golden brown tabby she-cat didn't reply immediately, and all I heard was what sounded like a small object roll across the den, eventually stopping at my paws. I flicked my ears as I recognized the scent, and lifted my head as I then heard Goldenshine's pawsteps trot towards me.

"A juniper berry!" she finally exclaimed through what sounded like a full mouth. Once she had arrived to my stock of herbs, I heard the several plops of berries landing on the ground next to my herb stock. "I grabbed a bunch for you!"

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. *Great. More work to do.* "Well, aren't you so nice," I muttered through gritted teeth.

Goldenshine then seemed to push the berries around with her paws. "I have *no* idea if you actually need them, but they looked especially good today." I then felt her poke my shoulder her tail. "And they reminded me of your eyeballs."

I rolled my eyes once again, or... *eyeballs*, as I then turned back to my herbs. "Wow, I am so grateful."

I then nearly felt Goldenshine's fur brush my own as she padded up to sit next to me, helping me to go through my herbs. "You should be!" she exclaimed before letting out a huff as I grabbed one of her paws and guided it to the right pile she had been looking for. "I clearly put a lot of thought into the gesture."

I couldn't help but sniff at that comment. "Throwing something at me that you think resembles my eyeball?"

I then watched, intrigued, as Goldenshine then seemed to grab another herb - yarrow, sniff it, and then put it in the correct pile. "Precisely," she then meowed, and I was almost certain that she'd winked at me.

I then shook my head slowly as I turned back to my herbs once again. "I hope you know that you're one of the only cats I know that would be able to get away with something like that."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Thank StarClan that Goldenshine had matured in at least some aspects since I'd first known her, and she didn't probe. Instead, she let out a small huff and lightly threw another juniper berry at me.

I let out a small purr of amusement, managing to throw it back at her as I felt a wave of affection rush through me. *She is the wackiest and most stubborn cat that I have ever met,* I thought as I began to build up the yarrow pile with her. *But at the same time, she blows my mind every day, and we've been through so much together - figuring out an entire cat's destiny ought to bring you closer to someone.*

I then shook my head lightly as I snorted. *Or maybe I'm just crazy,* I then thought. *I'm sure I couldn't get her away from me even if I wanted her to.* "So, how was your day?" I then asked Goldenshine. I rolled my eyes once again as I began to bring all of the juniper berries into a single pile. "You know, when you weren't pelting juniper berries

at your medicine cat."

Goldenshine let out an annoyed sigh before replying. "It was just fine!" she finally exclaimed. Then, after a moment, she seemed to shift her posture, and I sensed a large bout of excitement rush through her pelt. "Actually... it was pretty great!"

She then let out a satisfied huff, and I could hear leaves shuffling as she slightly brought her focus back to the herbs. "For one, I still can't believe that Cherrypaw is just days from becoming a warrior."

I grunted and flashed the golden brown she-cat a mockingly contemptuous look. "Somehow you've gotten her to that point." After Goldenshine snorted and gave me a small nudge on the shoulder, I then meowed, "Her assessment is tomorrow, right?"

"Darn right, it is!" Goldenshine then nearly squealed. "I know that she'll do incredibly well, and surely she'll be able to get her name soon after that!"

I then heard her let out yet another amused snort. "Swiftflight is absolutely ecstatic."

I couldn't help but raise my eyebrows in intrigue and amazement. "Oh, yeah?" *That tom being ecstatic for a genuinely good reason, who would've thought?*

"Uh... *yeah!*" Goldenshine replied, and I could almost sense her eager nod. "He's already added double the moss to his nest in the warriors den so that it'll be ready for her, and I don't know how many times he's come up to me asking me when her ceremony is."

I then heard her tail just barely brush against the ground, telling me that she was likely gesturing toward the outside of the medicine den. "He's even out hunting with her right now to help her practice for her assessment," she went on. "But I'm not even sure what practice she needs - she was *excellent* in training this morning."

"Or maybe Swiftflight just has a better sense of progress than his mother," I muttered. After Goldenshine gave me yet another nudge, I asked, "What about the rest of your day?"

The she-cat seemed to take a moment to think before replying. "Well, I took a nap after the dawn patrol and training, and then I went hunting with Dustystorm," she eventually answered. "And of course, we had to race a few times!"

I let out a sigh and rolled my eyes as I began to pick through all of the marigold. "Kits act more mature than the two of you combined, I swear."

"You're just jealous. Anyway, then we took a little rest out by the lake, and took a walk!" I then nearly flinched as I felt yet another small berry hit me in the shoulder. "That's when I grabbed the berries for you!"

I picked the berry up, placing it into a big pile with the others. "Did you tell Dustystorm about the berries' likeness to my eyeballs?"

I then heard Goldenshine sniff an herb and place it into a pile - I checked to see if she had done it correctly as she began to speak. "*Duh*. He thought it was inspired!"

As I then snorted and rolled my eyes yet again, Goldenshine let out a seemingly contemplative grunt as she seemed to observe the herbs in front of us. "Hm... I would ask how your day was, but I feel like I can guess!" she then exclaimed in amazement. "Goodness, this stash looks like it's gone through a thunderstorm!"

I held back another hiss as I had to push down my drastically rising irritation. "Goodness, and I thought that the juniper berry comparison to my eyes was genius!"

"Whatever," Goldenshine then muttered before genuinely seeming to be filled with concern. "Jayfeather, have you had a moment to breath since the battle?"

"As a matter of fact, no!" I barked back at her. "And if *someone* weren't in here, I maybe would get one."

As usual, the she-cat was not affected by my tone at all, and she gave me yet another light nudge. "Oh, please - I'm the highlight of your day," she teased. But after a moment, her demeanor seemed to

change again as I felt her put the tip of her tail on my shoulder. "But Jayfeather, I'm serious. I know that Leafpool has picked up her duties again, but maybe you all need some more help in here."

I then stared intently back at Goldenshine as she then seemed to hesitate to go on. "Maybe... maybe you should finally think about taking on another apprentice."

I snorted at that comment, rolling my eyes once again. "Your sister said the same thing," I muttered, filling up with both guilt and warmth at the same time at that thought.

"That's right," Goldenshine breathed as I felt a rush of excitement come from her direction. "Great StarClan, am I still so glad that she actually was here to be able to say that. I..."

She then let out a sigh, and she seemed to have sat down. "It's still so surreal to me, Jayfeather."

You have no idea, Goldenshine. You have no idea.

I sat down as well, beginning to shake my head slowly as more memories of that battle night began to resurface, my guilt being replaced by amazement.

In fact, my heart began to blaze as if it had just been struck by lightning as I recalled the very moment that a certain cat - my former apprentice who had first died at the claws of Ashfur; a cat that I would have given my own life for over and over, who I had loved for so much of my life - had finally returned. *I'd never thought I would see Snowflight again... and when Snowstorm – the cat who carried her soul - had collapsed, I lost all hope,* I recalled, a shiver running down my spine.

My fur then began to tingle as I remembered what had come next - one of the most amazing moments of my entire life. As Goldenshine had said, it was so surreal getting to feel Snowflight's presence, breath in her scent, hear her sweet voice again.

I slowly began to shake my head in awe as I finally replied to Goldenshine. "Oh, trust me, me too. I..." I trailed off for a moment

as I tried to find my words. "I had been just as worried as you were that we'd never see her again."

I then couldn't help but shut my eyes as another chill ran down my spine. "I don't know what I would have done." *I truly don't. I don't even think that Goldenshine would believe me, but a piece of my heart would have felt missing knowing that Snowflight's spirit was gone forever,* I then thought. *I was able to...* accept *her death a long time ago, but the thought of never getting to hear her voice, speak with her, or do something as little as stand beside her ever again is an unbearable thought.*

But knowing she's up there in StarClan, waiting for me, however, my fur can still tingle when I think about her. There's a sense of closure, and I'm so thankful for that.

I then shook my head quickly, breaking away from my own thoughts as Goldenshine spoke again. "You and me both," she nearly whispered. I then nearly flinched as she gave me a harder nudge, and she wrapped her tail around my shoulders. "But there's no need to be mopey-dopey about it! That didn't happen, and because of our brilliant teamwork-"

I grabbed her tail with my own, narrowing my eyes as I pushed it back towards her. "-*partly* teamwork."

"Whatever," Goldenshine muttered, pushing her tail right back as I rolled my eyes. "Because of our teamwork, she finally made it up to StarClan!"

Hold on...

I stiffened and flicked my ears, those words causing me to come to a somewhat concerning, fearsome realization. "...Hopefully..."

I could practically hear Goldenshine's heart beginning to pound with alarm, just as mine was. "Hopefully? What do you mean?" she pressed as she began to lash her tail back and forth anxiously. "I always thought that going up to StarClan was just... *automatic*."

I shrugged, trying to push down my fear as I turned to fully face

Goldenshine. "Well, yes... but it's also a process," I began to explain. "To put it simply for your brain-"

"Hey, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Some spirits take some time to get to StarClan," I went on, simply flicking Goldenshine's ear in response to her defensive question. "Sometimes they just wander in the real world as spirits before finally deciding that they're ready, or..."

I felt my fear beginning to make my fur rise once again, and I suddenly felt a strange sense of helplessness. "Or sometimes other things get in the way before they can make it up there." *Oh, StarClan forbid. And I don't mean that literally!*

With those words, Goldenshine seemed to fall deep into thought, her eyes narrowing. "I see..." she murmured. I was then surprised to hear her purr with amusement. "Ha, or maybe she's just in the Dark Forest instead. She did snap at me a few times when we were apprentices - she could be mean!"

I narrowed my eyes back at her, sniffing. "And you are such a kindhearted soul." I then heard Goldenshine snort, and I was sure that she had rolled her eyes. "I'm certain that Snowflight is going to StarClan. You, however..."

I then could feel the golden brown tabby she-cat's gaze burning into my fur. "I can easily throw another one of these berries at you."

I sniffed, batting at her with a paw. "Don't even try," I meowed sharply to her just before another wave of apprehension and foreboding rushed through my pelt. "I... I hope that Snowflight has made it up there safely... if she's made it up there at all..."

I heard Goldenshine stand up and take a step closer to me. "Is that something we should be worried about?" she asked, her voice soft and fearful. "How would we know if she's there?"

Well...

I narrowed my eyes, feeling a small rush of adrenaline, nerves and excitement as the answer to that question quickly came. "Well..." I

then said out loud to my friend as I felt my fur begin to tingle once again. "I suppose that I'd have to pay a visit to StarClan."

Goldenshine then gasped. "Oh my gosh!" she exclaimed. "Sometimes I forget that you have weird medicine cat powers!"

I cocked an eyebrow back at the she-cat. "Yes, I do, my eloquently spoken friend."

"Shut up," Goldenshine then muttered, her voice then becoming higher with excitement. "So, could you go up to StarClan and see that Snowflight is there?"

I then took a deep breath, taking a moment before giving a slow, contemplative nod. "I could..."

"You could?"

"And I will."

"You *will?*"

I looked back at Goldenshine as I continued to nod, feeling more certain of my decision with each heartbeat that went by. "Yes," I replied to her clearly.

I then took another deep breath, forcing myself to be more rational about the issue at that had fallen at our paws. "But honestly, I can almost be sure that she's up there," I murmured half to myself. "You're right, we did watch her ascend with the other StarClan cats."

I then felt a twinge of sadness come from Goldenshine's direction. "Aw, so you don't think that you need to check?"

I shook my head, quickly reassuring the she-cat. "Oh, no, I'm still going to check. And nevertheless..."

I then couldn't help but sigh as I raised my head towards the sky above, where I was sure the stars of Silverpelt were beginning to appear. And my heart filled up with warmth once again as thoughts of possibly running into Snowflight in StarClan took over. "And

nevertheless..." I eventually continued, "I just want to see her."

I was growing even more certain of my decision as I began to picture that first time that me, her, along with Lilypetal and Thornclaw had actually gotten to see Snowflight up in StarClan for the first time - also, one the first times that I had ever *seen* her, seen her.

I then thought once again about our second encounter since she'd died - when she had arisen from Snowstorm's body. Both had been such heartwarming, easing, and overwhelming experiences. *Almost too much for my cold heart to handle. However... they still didn't feel like enough.*

I then took yet another deep breath, bringing myself back to the present as I looked back at Goldenshine, my heart beginning to pound with the exhilaration and urgency of my mission. "I really want to see her."

I was certain that Goldenshine was staring right back at me, her heading nodding slowly. "I understand," she meowed tenderly as she walked up and gave me yet another nudge on the shoulder. "Say hi to her for me."

I simply flashed her a somewhat warm look as I then heard hear begin to pad out of the den. "Goodnight, Jayfeather. I hate you!"

I snorted and stood up, turning back towards the herbs that we had actually somewhat organized. "Oh, trust me, I hate you more."

Goldenshine paused at the bramble screen, likely cocking an eyebrow at me. "Doubtful."

"Not really," I muttered in reply as I began to flick my tail in her direction. "Now seriously - get out. I have things to do. Thanks for the juniper berries."

"Uh huh," Goldenshine then meowed before finally walking through the bramble screen. "Good luck!"

I then listened as Goldenshine's pawsteps got fainter and fainter, and then eventually let my mouth gape into a large yawn before

padding over to my moss nest. *There is absolutely no way that I'd be able to focus on herbs anymore.*

I then settled down in the moss clump, simply muttering a goodnight to Leafpool as she entered the den, lying down in her own nest just a few tail-lengths away. *Truthfully, I can't focus on anything else.*

I then finally lowered my head and closed my eyes, my heart still pounding with determination and eagerness as I began to drift off into sleep. *I'll see you soon in StarClan, Snowflight. And if for some reason you're not there, I will do whatever it takes to make sure that you get there.*

Chapter 2

Considering that my days were always spent in complete darkness, I was more than certain that I had arrived to the correct destination when I opened my eyes to see the smooth, shimmering grass and the bright, towering trees surrounding me.

I had made it to StarClan, just as I'd hoped that I would. *But I can't feel completely relieved or accomplished until I am sure that a certain cat is here...*

I'd barely taken my first pawstep when I heard the sound of another cat's voice come from behind me. "Jayfeather?"

I closed my eyes and nearly let out a frustrated hiss. *Of all cats that could have caught me here...*

I let out a long huff, taking a moment before finally turning around to face the gray, long-furred she-cat that I'd spoken to nearly every time that I'd come to StarClan in the past. *And while she was my guidepost for everything that I faced with the Dark Forest, she is also one of the last cats that I'd want to run into in this specific instance...* "Yellowfang..." I muttered to the StarClan cat through gritted teeth.

As I met her gaze, she sat down and wrapped her tail around her paws, her orange eyes narrowing. "Fancy meeting you here."

I rolled my eyes, letting out a long hiss. "Oh, sure it is."

Yellowfang ignored my scoffing, her narrowed gaze still burning into my fur. ""Out of all cats, I would think that you could sense sarcasm when you hear it."

I decided to narrow my eyes back at her, my tail beginning to twitch impatiently. "Out of all cats, I would think that you could sense that I gave you a sarcastic response, therefore showing that I sensed your sarcasm."

"Well-"

I hissed once again, my patience quickly boiling over. "For StarClan's sake, I don't have time for this," I muttered sharply before taking a step closer to the older StarClan spirit and fixing her with a hard, desperate stare. "Yellowfang, do you know if-"

I had to keep my fur from rising when Yellowfang took a pawstep back, clearly pretending to look surprised as she raised her eyebrows and tilted her head to the side. "Well, no time to chat with 'ol Yellowfang?"

"No," I replied, my voice becoming stiffer with each time I spoke. "I... I was hoping that I could see..."

I then found myself trailing off, realizing that I was actually somewhat embarrassed to admit to the she-cat the reason why I was here. "I... I was wanting to see-"

"Say no more." Yellowfang quickly meowed.

"*What?*" I exclaimed. "But I barely said anything!"

Yellowfang began to shake her head slowly, her orange eyes now gleaming as she looked back at me. "You don't need to."

The gray fluffy she-cat's expression said it all to me; I suddenly felt as if the heaviest boulder in the entire world had been lifted off of my back. *Not only have I just been reassured that Snowflight is safe, but also, I don't know if Yellowfang has ever really delivered good news to me when I come up here.* "She's here?" I pressed to Yellowfang, my voice rising with excitement as I stepped closer to her. "Where is she?"

Yellowfang's eyes continued to gleam as she flicked her tail towards the shimmering forest that was just pawsteps away. "She's sitting at the pond just beyond these trees," she answered. "It's surrounded by juniper berries - you'll know it when you see it."

I couldn't help but sigh as my heart warmed with affection. *Of course she is there...*

I then shook my head quickly, bringing myself back into focus as I flashed Yellowfang a grateful look. "Great," I muttered, not hesitating for one more moment as I began to run in the direction of the trees. "Thanks."

"Jayfeather."

I abruptly stopped in my tracks, pushing down my frustration as I looked back at the StarClan cat who'd had the *audacity* to speak to me again. "What, for StarClan's sake!?"

I then narrowed my eyes once again, actually now somewhat curious to see what Yellowfang had to say once I noticed the wary, fearful look that darkened her orange gaze. "Jayfeather..." she repeated after a few moments, "I know that you miss her, but... be careful. Please."

Despite me then sighing and breaking my gaze away from her, she went on. "I know what you two have shared, and it is because she was also your apprentice and a Clanmate that I am allowing this," she meowed solemnly. "You must remember where your loyalties lie, at least while you are still alive. But despite all of that..."

I then could see the gray she-cat stepping closer to me out of the corner of my eye, and I tried my hardest to ignore her somber gaze that might as well have burnt a hole in my ear. "You realize that going to see her will only bring you more grief?" she then nearly whispered. "Yes, you will get to see her, but what happens when you have to leave her? You'll miss her just as much; be just as heartbroken."

Great StarClan... shut up, please.

I slowly let my lids close once again as all of Yellowfang's words seemed to engulf my own body, making me nearly shudder with grief for just a moment. She was absolutely right, as much as I hated to admit it.

But at the same time, I found that it didn't matter to me at all. *I've experienced too much heartbreak to not deserve this. And anyway, after all of the time that has been lost... the heartbreak is worth it.*

I opened my eyes again, turning my head to look at Yellowfang once again. "It's worth a lifetime of heartbreak if it means that I get to spend one heartbeat with her," I then meowed, my voice seeming to echo through the clearing.

Then, without waiting for the she-cat's reply, I then continued to pad in the direction that Yellowfang had given to me - her words quickly leaving my mind. *And anyway, I'm not coming here just for me - I need to know if she is safe and happy up here,* I told myself. *One benefit of her reincarnating into another cat is that I still somewhat knew where she was and how she was doing...*

Then shaking my thoughts away, I broke into a run once again as I made my way deeper into the forest. Luckily, being somewhat familiar with StarClan helped me to know the exact place that Yellowfang had described to me, and I knew precisely where I was going.

I then felt my heart begin to beat faster - and not just because I was running. *Now, the question here is if I'll actually find her here...*

I tried to hold out hope once I arrived to the pond - the pond that seemed to have countless amounts of juniper berries surrounding it. I nearly slid as I came to a stop and immediately scanned the area to look for her.

I narrowed my eyes, laying my eyes on every single bush in sight, hoping to catch a glimpse of her white fur. *Please, please...*

But I felt my heart practically sink as I almost immediately figured out that she wasn't there - just as I had feared. *Great... now this means that I'll have to spend even more time looking for her,* I realized

as I closed my eyes and shook my head slowly. *Which means that I'll have less time to spend with her before I wake up...*

Then, I nearly let out a startled hiss as I heard something drop to the ground next to me. I whipped my head to my side to see a juniper berry bouncing off of the ground before rolling up and lightly hitting against one of my paws.

What in the name of... I thought to myself, my eyes narrowing once again as I sniffed. *Is it just my destiny to have juniper berries be pelted at me wherever I go?*

I then lifted my head to see if I could find where the berry had fallen from - assuming that it had just dropped from one of the several cedar trees that encapsulated the area.

And of course, I had just initially expected to see the several cedar branches looming over me, but instead, I felt my heart flip upside down as I immediately recognized a very, very familiar white pelt standing on one of the thicker branches of the tree. *Oh my StarClan...*

There she was.

I was actually speechless, and couldn't do anything but process the fact that I was laying my eyes on this she-cat that I had spent so many moons missing so much. *And while I got to see her just days ago, that doesn't make this feel any less surreal...*

For a moment, I kept completely silent as Snowflight slowly but surely made her way across the branch she was on. She seemed to be scanning every single berry that was surrounding her.

I then flicked my ears as her gaze then stopped on one, and once she snatched it from the tree with her teeth and threw it towards the ground, I reached out a paw and felt a twinge of satisfaction as it landed onto my pad.

I then urgently looked back up to the tree, and just as I had expected, Snowflight was immensely confused to not hear the sound of the juniper berry landing onto the ground. By the time that she

actually looked down, my heart was practically in throat.

But at the same time, it had never felt lighter as I watched Snowflight's pale blue eyes immediately wash over with shock and longing as they fell on me.

I then felt my heart stretch out and twist up into countless amounts of knots as we locked eyes. For a moment, I was speechless, and I could do nothing but stare up at her. *After all, I haven't actually been able to lay eyes on her since she first had died...*

While I didn't fall for her outer beauty... I literally wasn't able to, that most certainly doesn't mean that she fails in that area... because she doesn't at all...

Honestly, I could have just stayed like that forever, my gaze locked with hers, but eventually brought myself to speak. "I'd watch it when you drop those," I called up to Snowflight, a smirk slowly emerging on my face as I held up the juniper berry I had caught. "It could hit a cat in the eye and blind them, you know."

"Forget them!"

I then was caught off guard for a moment as Snowflight then leapt down from the tree, and the next thing I knew, she had pressed herself into my fur. As soon as her own fur had brushed mine, and I heard her loud purr, I felt my own purrs rising in my throat.

I couldn't help but close my eyes for a moment as her scent flooded into my nose, and all of my current stresses I was experiencing in the real world seemed to disappear.

I then raised my eyebrows as Snowflight pulled away from me, and I was able to meet her bright, shining pale blue gaze once again. "Oh my StarClan, Jayfeather!" she exclaimed. "Hi!"

I then purred with amusement as Snowflight pressed herself against me once again. "Snowflight..." I nearly whispered, finally wrapping my tail around her as I began to lick her head. *Great StarClan, this is already more than I ever could have asked for... I can't believe I waited this long to see her here.*

Snowflight managed to snuggle even closer to me as she spoke again. "Jayfeather... I cannot believe that you're here," she then purred.

I pulled her even closer to me and sighed once again. "Of course I am, Snowflight," I meowed softly, letting my eyes close for just a moment before looking down to meet her gaze. "Long time, no see, huh?"

"Just a bit!" Snowflight then meowed back before proceeding to lick my cheek and press her muzzle to it. "I missed you!"

I returned the gesture, and flicked the white she-cat's ear with my tail as I stared deep into her eyes - *something I had wanted to do so badly when we were both alive*. "And I missed you," I then replied to her. *More than I could ever tell you...*

Snowflight then flicked her ears and tilted her head to the side, her eyes still glowing with amazement. "What are you doing here?"

I couldn't help but press my muzzle against her cheek a second time. "I came to see you," I answered simply. I then looked back up at the cedar tree above us, and the confusion that I had originally felt when I'd found Snowflight up there finally registered. "What in the name of StarClan were *you* doing up *there*? You definitely weren't up in trees much back when we went out in the forest in ThunderClan."

Snowflight followed my gaze as she also looked up at the tree. "I was picking juniper berries!" she explained. She then looked back down at me to reveal her astonished, eager eyes. "Can you believe that they grow on cedar trees as much as bushes? I nearly squealed when I found them."

I then watched, another purr rising in my throat, as she grabbed a juniper berry that was next to her and held it up to me. "Now I pick some whenever I can - they seem to get more beautiful and blue the higher that you go."

She then sighed, taking a whiff of the juniper berry before setting it down and looking back at me once again. When I didn't

immediately reply to her, she sniffed and tilted her head to the side. "What?"

For a few more heartbeats, I still didn't reply as I was barely able to take how light and warm my heart felt as I listened to her gush about her love of juniper berries. "Nothing, I..." I eventually was able to force out.

I then shook my head quickly, holding back a hiss. *Geez, Jayfeather. You're here to see her and to make sure that she's okay, not to make her question you or her overall life choices.* "Nothing," I then meowed more loudly.

I then let out a sigh, pulling Snowflight closer to me once again with my tail. "So, how are you? How has StarClan been treating you?"

Snowflight purred with amusement - clearly knowing me very well, before answering. "Honestly... I'm just fine!" she answered, to my relief. "StarClan is treating me as well as it can be, however..."

I then flicked my ears, feeling a slight pang of worry as the she-cat's gaze darkened. "I just miss ThunderClan, I miss my family..." She then looked back up at me, touching her nose to mine. "I miss you..."

I then looked down at her paws, and I found myself trying to meet her gaze again. "I almost wish that I had just been able to die after Ashfur killed me, you know?" she then meowed more quietly. "Getting to return as Snowstorm and then returning to StarClan much later almost made an already bad wound become even deeper."

I sighed once again, hating to hear that Snowflight felt this way. I then lifted her chin up with my tail so that I could meet her gaze again. "And that goes both ways, Snowflight," I insisted to her, the passion of my words practically bubbling up inside of me. "I hope that you know that I've spent all of this time missing you..."

That passion was then overcome with an unbearable amount of guilt as a certain memory crossed my mind - something Snowflight

and I hadn't been able to discuss yet - and I almost couldn't go on for a moment. "Even... even when I..."

Snowflight began to shake her head slowly, her eyes full of love and understanding. "I know, Jayfeather. That's okay," she then whispered. "You don't need to explain."

I then flicked my ears with surprise, and I felt my eyes widen. "You... you're not upset about Half Moon?" *The one she-cat that I somehow managed to fall for after you... I still can't believe it sometimes.*

"Of course not," Snowflight insisted, and I could immediately tell that her answer was genuine.

She then rolled her eyes, giving a shrug. "I mean, sure - you have no idea how much I wished that we had more moments like what you and her shared," she went on before running her tail down my flank. "However... I know it's what all of the dead cats say, but... I'm happy that you didn't spend all of your time grieving over me."

I finally took the opportunity to twin my tail with hers, catching it as she stroked my flank. "That doesn't mean that I didn't, Snowflight," I insisted to her, my voice coming out more sharply than I'd anticipated.

"I know, but-"

I quickly cut Snowflight off, refusing to let her believe that she'd ever left my mind. "Yes, Half Moon was wonderful, and I... I did love her too," I admitted to her. *And it is because I love* you *that I feel that I must admit that...* "But she also made me realize how much I missed you. I mean... it's like you said..."

I then shifted closer to Snowflight, pressing my muzzle against hers. "We never got to share moments like that."

Snowflight began to purr once again as she pressed back. "No, we didn't."

After a few heartbeats of me simply breathing in her scent, I pulled away, gestured to the ground with my tail, and then pressed up

against Snowflight as we both lied down on the soft grass. She leaned her head on my shoulder as I then began to lick behind one of her ears.

"Great StarClan," I eventually meowed as I then simply rested my muzzle on Snowflight's head. "I wish that this could last forever."

I then felt Snowflight press her muzzle into my neck fur. "Me too..." she whispered. I then raised my eyebrows, surprised, when she pulled her head away and met my gaze with worried, sorrowful eyes. "Do you need to wake up soon? I don't want to be the reason that you don't get up to your duties!"

I let out a small purr of amusement, flicking Snowflight's ear once again. "Ironically, you used to be the reason that I *did* get up to them."

"Oh, please - you'd be up, anyway."

I then rolled my eyes, continuing to purr. "I know..." I sighed.

I then gave a sharp shake of my head. "But either way, no."

Snowflight's eyes widened, and she tilted her head to the side. "No?"

"No," I replied definitely, touching my muzzle to her cheek. "I don't need to leave yet." *I don't* want *to leave yet.*

"I'm fine with that!"

I then let out a small chuckle as I then watched Snowflight lean her head on my shoulder once again, my heart still feeling as light and as warm as it had been when I first found her. *Yellowfang was wrong,* I told myself. *Although I'll eventually have to leave Snowflight and wake up, just being able to remember these moments and knowing that I might have them again is enough to last me a lifetime.*

I then couldn't help but snort as another thought crossed my mind. *Well... and I suppose other cats will be keeping me going until then.* "By the way," I then meowed, giving Snowflight a small nudge and a wink. "Goldenshine says hi."

Snowflight immediately let out a gasp and lifted her head to look at me - clearly excited to hear her sister's name. "Aw, tell that mouse-brain that I say hi right back!" she exclaimed. "How is she doing, by the way?"

I narrowed my eyes and stared ahead, trying to recall everything that the golden brown she-cat had told me the previous day. "Well, she certainly has her paws full right now," I reported to Snowflight. "But at the same time, I don't think I've seen her happier - her first apprentice is about to become a warrior, and she and Swiftflight are getting along better than they ever have."

I then looked back at Snowflight to see her shaking her head slowly, her eyes shining with mischief. "Her and Swiftflight aren't the only ones, it seems," she purred as she then gave me a nudge right back. "It makes me so happy to see how close you two have become. Really."

"Hm. For some reason I decided to tolerate her and talk to her on a regular basis."

"Uh huh," Snowflight muttered, giving a roll of her eyes.

I then flicked my ears - the topic of Goldenshine making me recall something else. *Surely the most important, vital, and pressing thing that the two of us will discuss tonight...* "Ah, that reminds me..."

I shifted slightly so that I could come face-to-face with the beautiful white she-cat. "What berry or herb best reminds you of Goldenshine's eyes?"

Snowflight's eyes immediately washed over with shock. "Excuse me?"

"You heard what I said."

"Yes, I did, and I am questioning it."

"Answer *my* question."

I then couldn't help but purr as well Snowflight then finally let out a purr of amusement and tilted her head to the side once again.

"Jayfeather, why in the name of StarClan do you need this information?"

I slowly narrowed my eyes back at her. "Whatever berry or herb you tell me, I will throw at Goldenshine."

"Oh my goodness!" Snowflight then exclaimed, her tail lashing up in surprise, but her eyes still glittered with humor. "I'm not sure if I want you to have information that would warrant you to throw something at my sister!"

I held her gaze, putting the tip of my tail on her shoulder. "Goldenshine said that you should be in the Dark Forest because you were mean to her."

Snowflight's ice-blue eyes then immediately narrowed down into slits. "Rocks," she muttered through gritted teeth. "Her eyes resemble rocks. Throw a rock at her."

Lovers to Enemies

[image]

Read on to understand a certain WindClan tom's motivations behind his actions of love, as well as betrayal, selfishness, and pure evil...

Breezepelt's POV

Chapter 1

I nearly let out a hiss, gritting my teeth as a cold breeze brushed through the air, seeming to encapsulate every single piece of fur on my body as it also made the brown leaves above shiver and rub against each other.

I stood up from where I stood in WindClan's training hollow as I shook out my fur. *Great StarClan,* I thought as I scanned my eyes around the clearing, where Crowfeather, my father, as well as my Clanmate, Heathertail, and Boulderpaw and Furzepaw - our two apprentices - had settled come twilight. Although no one had directly said anything, I could tell that they were just as cold as I already was. *We're nearly freezing our tails off, and it feels as if leaf-fall has only just arrived!*

But I tried to push away my discomfort, trying to focus on Heathertail's sweet, yet assertive and commanding voice as she instructed our two apprentices on the proper hunting crouch. "Now, when you're down in a hunting crouch, remember," she went on as she gently pushed Furzepaw's shoulders down, "It's just as important to not be heard as it is not to be seen."

I shook out my fur a second time before stepping forward. "Exactly," I then meowed, picking off of the light brown tabby she-cat's words. I then did as Heathertail had done, putting my paws on Boulderpaw's shoulders to adjust his position. "You don't want your tail to brush against the ground, so make sure you keep it up high!"

I then felt myself having to suppress yet another hiss, but not from the cold this time.

Almost right after I had finished speaking, Crowfeather - who had come simply just to oversee our hunting session - let out a disapproving grunt. And with each pawstep he took towards me and Boulderpaw, I felt what seemed like a forest fire spread deeper and deeper throughout my entire pelt.

And his first words were practically a fog. "Well, not exactly," he muttered, stopping beside Boulderpaw as he began to raise one of his paws.

It never ends, does it? It never ends!

That's all that it took for the fire to spill out from my jaws, and I whipped myself around to meet Crowfeather's surprised, yet annoyed gaze. "What are you doing?" I hissed.

Crowfeather didn't move, but his blue eyes flashed with alarm for a moment. "Keep your fur on! I'm just trying to-"

I let out another hiss, batting his paw away from where he'd tried to lift it once again. "You're not trying to do *anything*," I then muttered through gritted teeth.

Crowfeather then let out an exasperated sigh as he rolled his eyes. "Breezepelt, I'm just trying to correct what you said, and I-"

I didn't let my father finish. *Whatever he says won't matter anyway. It never goes in my favor.* "And what gives you the right to do that?"

My ears then flicked with alarm as I recognized the sigh of Heathertail come from behind me, and I turned my head just slightly to see her tail anxiously twitching back and forth. "Breezepelt..."

But I ignored the she-cat, turning back to Crowfeather as he spoke again. I nearly took I step back as I realized that his muzzle was just about a mouse-length from mine. "I'm sorry," he then barked at me. "Who's been in this Clan longer?"

I then took a step back as he took a step towards me. "That doesn't matter!" I murmured before taking a step back towards him. "Back off, Crowfeather!"

This time, Crowfeather didn't return the gesture, and only stared back at me with dark, angry eyes. "What is wrong with you? You're making a spectacle for no reason."

"Foxdung!" I then growled back at him. "I know what I'm talking about!"

I then took another step back, slightly startled as Crowfeather leaped forward, now standing in between me and Boulderpaw as he continued to give me a hard stare. "Clearly, you don't," he then muttered sharply. "Now let me give Boulderpaw the right direction so that he doesn't scare away every piece of prey in the forest."

Without even waiting for my reply, he finally broke my gaze and turned back to Boulderpaw. "Yes, you must make sure that your tail doesn't brush against anything," he then meowed, his voice much softer - softer than he'd ever spoken to me in my life. "But you also don't want any creatures to see your tail sticking up in the air as you're sneaking towards them. So you have..."

The more that Crowfeather spoke, the more that his words then became a blur as my resentment and anger nearly boiled over once again. I felt my eyes narrow as I stared back at the tom that - for some StarClan-forsaken reason - was my kin. *But that doesn't matter; I might as well be a rogue in the forest to that tom, because I receive none of his respect.*

I then found myself having to stand up, and I let my claws slide out as I continued to reflect on how the dark gray tom had treated me as far back as when I was a kit. *It's like he waits every moment of the day, eager to correct me or tell me what I'm doing wrong... it's not fair at all.*

I then suppressed yet another hiss as I let my head fall to the ground, trying to force myself to shake off my irritation. *What do I even need his attention? It's never positive.* I tried to rationalize. *Yes, he's my father, but-*

"Breezepelt!"

My frustration and exasperation then rose as quickly as prey runs from its predator as Crowfeather's sharp voice broke through my thoughts. "*What*, for StarClan's sake!?" I barked back at him, my fur bristling.

The sight of Crowfeather not being phased by my demeanor or tone was almost just as enraging. "I'm done," he meowed, lashing his tail to my apprentice. "You can further instruct Boulderpaw."

I took a deep breath as I licked one of my paws and ran it over my ear. "Are you sure that you wouldn't rather just take over as his mentor?" I muttered bitterly. "You're clearly more qualified."

Crowfeather simply sighed and rolled his eyes once again. "Stop acting like a kit, Breezepelt," he breathed as he then gestured towards the sky with his tail. "We're losing daylight."

I finally gave in, letting out a sigh as well. "Fine," I muttered, finally turning away from the dark gray tom. I briefly flashed an apologetic look to Heathertail, who was now on my other side. I actually finally let my fur lie completely flat as gave me a quick look of sympathy.

It was enough to motivate me to continue the training session. "How about we let Boulderpaw and Furzepaw practice for a little while?"

Heathertail immediately gave me a gentle nod. "That's fine!" she agreed before turning to our apprentices. "Alright, you two - we're going to have you both practice hunting for a little while so that you can nail that hunting crouch."

I was able to feel the smallest twinge of satisfaction as the two younger cats immediately stood up, clearly eager to hear Heathertail's directions. "Stay within the area," she went on, "and if no prey turns up, just practice that sneaking!"

I then watched as Furzepaw and Boulderpaw both nodded excitedly, the discomfort they had probably felt from the quarrel

they had just witnessed practically disintegrating, before dispersing and padding lightly through the area - their muzzles in the air.

I had only been observing them for a few moments, preparing to give them any sort of direction, when I heard footsteps padding in my direction.

For a moment, I hoped that it was Crowfeather, walking up to apologize to me. However, I knew that that was an absolutely ridiculous thought. Of course, my father was on the other side of the hollow, his eyes narrowed as he watched the two apprentices.

I quickly realized that it was actually Heathertail making her way towards me, her beautiful blue eyes full of concern.

I then felt my ears grow hot as she sat down next to me and leaned her muzzle into my ear. "Are you okay?" she then whispered.

For some reason, it was my first instinct to immediately pull away. "Yes, I'm fine," I muttered, now trying my best to ignore her worried gaze burning into my pelt. "Don't worry about it."

Along with my ears, my entire body then seemed to grow hot, wiping away any of the chills I had felt from the cold weather before, as it finally set in just how embarrassed I was that Heathertail had witnessed the quarrel between Crowfeather and me. *And for some reason, that fact that she is worried about it feels worse...*

But honestly, any cat in WindClan probably applies to this situation at this point...

Before the tabby she-cat could say anything else, I stood up, beginning to pad towards the shrubs that I'd watched my apprentice disappear through as I continued to force down my anger and humiliation. "Listen, I'm going to go watch Boulderpaw," I meowed to her, not looking back as I left her alone. "I'll see you later."

~>~>~>~>~>~>~>~

Unfortunately, by the time that the sun had nearly set, neither Boulderpaw nor Furzepaw had had any luck finding anything even *resembling* prey. *Leaf-bare will be here any day now... I should have*

expected this.

When Heathertail, Crowfeather and I made this unnerving, but not very surprising revelation, we had decided to go a bit deeper into our territory to see if we could find anything at all.

However, StarClan must've decided that cats just don't need to eat. *Hm, they always have been neglectful...*

But I shook away my bitter thoughts once I heard Heathertail speak, her blue eyes glowing in the evening light as she watched Furzepaw and Boulderpaw hopelessly sniff out any potential prey nearby. "Goodness, even when you two nail the hunting crouch, none of the prey shows!"

Beside her, Crowfeather simply sniffed as he shook his head slowly. "It's been a long time since a hunting trip has been this hard..."

I then flicked my ears, my fur beginning to prickle with excitement as I came up with a possible solution. "Well, of course it'll be hard finding any prey when we're all together," I observed. "How about we split up and hunt in different parts of the territory?"

I already felt my lips beginning to curl back into a snarl as I heard the familiar skeptical grunt come from Crowfeather's direction. I didn't even look at him when he spoke. "I'm not sure if that's a good idea," he replied. "Especially when moonhigh is fast approaching."

I forced myself to stay in my place, however, I was almost *too* exasperated and exhausted to show it. I'd braced myself for the criticism as soon as I'd spoken. "Of course you disagree," I muttered, almost too quietly for anyone to hear.

But of course, Crowfeather's ears were open. "Breezepelt, for StarClan's sake!" he barked, giving a single irritated lash of his tail.

"You're always ready to bite back, aren't you?" I went on, my voice quickly rising up to a growl as I turned to face Crowfeather. "I could say that WindClan is the best Clan on earth, and you'd disagree with me just because you *can!*"

"What a load of foxdung!" Crowfeather hissed back. "How do you

think I'd benefit from that, Breezepelt?"

Crowfeather could legitimately try to explain himself, or do something as little as make excuses - at this point, he angered me either way. "I don't know!" I growled, taking a step towards him. "For some reason you love to do nothing but put me down, so I don't expect anything less from you!"

Crowfeather also took a step closer to me. We were practically muzzle to muzzle once again. Our eyes might as well have been a single blazing ball of fire. "Well, when you say or do something wrong, I'm going to let you know that I see that!"

"Which, to you, is *constantly!*"

I then was completely caught off guard when Heathertail herself let out a hiss, leaping forward so that she stood in between the two of us. "Come on, you two!" sounding more angry than I probably had ever heard her. "It's only getting darker while you bicker like this."

I then couldn't help but let out another hiss, turning away from both of them as the she-cat went on. "While I agree that hunting in the dark is harder, and a bit more risky, I definitely don't want to return to camp empty-pawed, if we can."

I then raised my head slightly, feeling the smallest bit of warmth and relief at the fact that the she-cat agreed with me. "What do you think, Crowfeather?" I then heard her meow.

Even though my father was now completely behind me, I could practically *feel* his blue gaze still burning into me.

For a moment, he didn't speak, and only let out a long sigh. "Fine," he finally murmured after a few heartbeats.

I couldn't help but let out a quiet, contemptuous hiss as I turned back around to face my Clanmates. *Of course Heathertail was the one to get through to him, and not me.*

Nevertheless, I listened as the older tom gave directions. "Heathertail and Furzepaw can come with me, and Breezepelt and Boulderpaw - you two can go together."

I then watched as he made his way towards one side of the clearing, beckoning to Heathertail and Furzepaw with his tail. "Let's meet at this same spot just before moonhigh."

And my eagerness to have a moment away from Crowfeather began to rise as his tail finally disappeared through some bushes. "Behave yourselves."

Once my father, along with Heathertail and Furzepaw, where completely out of sight, I turned away, mouthed Crowfeather's latest words silently, before hissing once again and giving a lash of my tail. *The fact that he trusts me with my apprentice by myself is shocking.*

I then snorted as I lashed my tail towards Boulderpaw, beckoning him to follow me as my gut and heart for some reason led me towards the stream nearby. *Even though that's exactly what I'm supposed to do...*

Chapter 2

By the time that the sun had completely disappeared behind the moor hills, not even one piece of prey had made any appearance, let alone make a noise or trail any sort of scent.

Boulderpaw and I had been walking along the stream for a while now, and I had to admit, something as little as the calm of the night was incredibly frustrating.

For a moment, I wondered if we all should have even split up - I hated the thought of coming back to the rest of the group with nothing. However, I also refused to comply with what Crowfeather had originally argued.

So, I had decided to give Boulderpaw a more thorough hunting lesson, hoping that if we waited things out a bit longer, he'd finally be able to practice on real prey. "That's it..." I murmured, watching as the young tom went down into his hunting crouch once again.

I then padded up to him, going down into a crouch as well in order to demonstrate. "Make sure that your belly is as low to the ground as it can be," I went on, before proceeding to let out a snort. "And your tail..."

I then rolled my eyes as I watched Boulderpaw's green eyes light up. "Oh, yeah!" I then watched as the tom lowered his tail to where it was just about a mouse-length off of the ground - just as Crowfeather had supposedly taught him. "Like that, right?"

I held back another hiss, speaking my next words through gritted teeth. "Yes, that's right." *Great StarClan, it literally feels like a physical wound whenever I have to-*

My head then shot up, and I flicked my ears as a warm, delicious, and familiar scent began to flood through my nose.

Rabbit. For a moment, it almost felt as if I'd never get to smell it again.

I slowly rose back up to my paws, raising my tail to silence my apprentice. "Hey, Boulderpaw," I whispered as quietly as possible as I lifted my muzzle up in the air. "Do you smell that?"

I only slightly turned my head so that I could see Boulderpaw's eyes widen. "Whoa!" he whispered even more quietly than I had. Then, after he had scanned the area for just a few heartbeats, I raised my eyebrows as he then gave a single sharp nod straight ahead. "There it is!"

I followed the gray tom's gaze, and I immediately spotted the plump brown creature just a few pawsteps away. *No way...* I thought as my fur seemed to rise with excitement. *There's no way Crowfeather would be able to criticize my apprentice catching something like that...*

I let out a quiet, satisfied grunt as I flicked my tail forward. "You're right, Boulderpaw," I replied quietly after a few heartbeats. "Go for it."

I then took the quietest possible pawstep backwards that I could as Boulderpaw crouched down - correctly - and began to sneak

towards the creature just barely out of his reach.

I almost felt just as excited as if I were the one about to make the catch - this might have been one of the biggest rabbits I had ever seen, and it had no idea we were there.

I actually let my claws sink into the ground as I realized that Boulderpaw was about to make his leap towards the rabbit. He was likely just a heartbeat away from sinking his claws into the creature.

So, I couldn't suppress a hiss when the sound of a rustle came from across the stream, causing the rabbit to run off into the darkness.

Boulderpaw let out an annoyed grunt. "Aw, no!" he meowed as he slashed at a leaf on the ground. "I was so close! What was that?"

To be honest, I barely heard my apprentice's words, and I found myself staring intently across the stream - my ears pricking as the rustling sounds continued on ThunderClan's side of the border.

The footsteps were too light to be a piece of prey; it was a cat for sure. *But who else would be out at this time?* I wondered. *I hope they know that they probably just cost a few cats in WindClan their dinner.*

A warm rush then ran through me, and I felt my eyes narrowing as I continued to ponder the situation. How many cats in ThunderClan wander alone at this time?

Without even thinking, my paws began to make their way closer to the stream that was just barely in sight. "I'm not too sure, Boulderpaw..." I murmured, finally replying to the young tom's question.

I then found my pace and my heartbeat simultaneously quickening. "But I'm going to check."

I then immediately heard lighter, quicker footsteps come from behind me. "Oh, can I come with you?" Boulderpaw called out from behind me.

I then abruptly stopped in my tracks, hesitating for just a moment

before finally looking back towards Boulderpaw. "Um... no, Boulderpaw," I replied to him, trying to sound as certain and authoritative as I could. "I think it's best that you stay here."

My apprentice then sat down, his eyes washing over with worry as he tilted his head to the side. "Are you sure? I don't know if Crowfeather would like us splitting up even more-"

For a moment, the excitement of my travel to the stream completely went away and was replaced with immense indignation as I whipped back around to face Boulderpaw. "To foxdung with what Crowfeather says!"

I then almost immediately turned back around, continuing towards the stream without waiting for Boulderpaw's reply. "I'll be right back. Don't move."

All I had to do was slither through some bushes before the stream fully came into sight. The change of seasons and the small leaf-fall breeze caused it to be quite active, but the sound of the flowing water was practically drowned out by the sounds of the crickets and other very small creatures that surrounded the area.

And just as I had suspected, I caught wind of a fresh ThunderClan scent just heartbeats later.

I stepped to the side and crouched down behind some shrubs, listening as the rustles were becoming even louder, and even closer.

But I rose back up almost instantly, as I immediately recognized the scent, the pace of the movements and the footsteps...

And the golden brown tabby pelt that eventually emerged through some brambles on the other side of the stream confirmed the suspicions that I'd had since I first heard those rustles. "Goldenshine?" I exclaimed, fully stepping out into the open.

I actually felt a small twinge of pride as I watched the she-cat's head immediately rise at the sound of her name. Her eyes widened with surprised as she then met my gaze.

I stared right back at her big, gray eyes, a chill running down my

spine. *This feels so strangely familiar...* I thought in amazement as the cat I had once called my mate - the she-cat that I'd had a kit with and would have once given up everything for - stood in her place on the other side of the stream. *I can't even begin to put it in to words...*

And luckily, I didn't have to as Goldenshine herself ran up to her side of the stream, her eyes still wide with shock. "Breezepelt?" she then meowed, her voice full of its usual enthusiasm. "Hey!"

I found myself running up to my side of the stream to meet her, for some reason, feeling so much excitement at the sight of the she-cat - this being only the second time I'd seen her since we parted ways - the first being at a Gathering just a couple of moons ago, where we luckily had been able to establish what I understood to be a friendship.

So, I actually found that I had no problem interacting with Goldenshine, and I found that was very, very happy to see her. "Hey!" I called back. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Just a bit!" Goldenshine purred as her tail began to lash back and forth. "How are you doing?"

There had been a time where I shared absolutely everything with this cat, and I saw no reason to stop at this point. "Well... let's just say that you're a breath of fresh air right now." Then, after the two of us purred with amusement, I asked, "How are things going for you?"

I couldn't hold back another purr as Goldenshine shrugged, letting out an exasperated sigh. "Things are going!" she exclaimed.

I then raised my eyebrows as I watched her tilt her head to the side, her eyes slowly beginning to narrow down into slits as they glittered with mischief. "Funny enough - I think I've asked you this before... What in the name of StarClan are you doing out here, anyway?"

I shrugged back at Goldenshine, now having to try my hardest to suppress another purr. But I still gave her a smirk as I gave my

reply. "...Hunting?" I murmured.

Goldenshine simply raised a single eyebrow as she returned my smirk. "By yourself?"

"Well, this time... no," I replied, my voice full of laughter.

I then flicked my ears, letting out an amused grunt as I was able to come to a conclusion about something - the thing that had brought me over here in the first place. "I was out with Boulderpaw looking for prey, when this nuisance of a cat scared away the rabbit he was about to catch!"

I then held back laughter once again as Goldenshine's eyes slowly widened. "No..." she breathed. "Are you joking?"

"Not really."

I then slightly regretted my teasing as Goldenshine stood up, her gray eyes washing over with genuine disappointment. "Aw, shoot!" she meowed. "Ugh, I knew that I was getting a little too close to the border... and being a little too loud."

She then shook her head as she let out a sigh, taking a step closer to the stream. "I'm sorry, Breezepelt. I probably just cost a few cats in WindClan their dinner!"

I stood up as well, flashing the she-cat a reassuring look. *Huh... seeing her upset really makes me think that me being upset over a lost rabbit really isn't worth it.* "Really, don't worry about it," I meowed to her.

Then, as our gazes met once again, I felt a surprisingly strong rush of warm run through my pelt. "Honestly... it's really great to see you again," I then murmured. "So, what in the name of StarClan are *you* doing out here by yourself?"

Goldenshine let out another purr as she began to shuffle her paws from side to side. "Well, funny enough, I was also hunting, but with Dustystorm!"

I then felt myself tense up.

I then watched as Goldenshine began to shuffle her paws from side to side, having to keep my own fur lying flat. "If you remember him..." she then nearly whispered. "And his deal..."

After a couple of heartbeats, I forced myself to answer. "Oh, I definitely do..." I replied, trying to sound at least somewhat enthusiastic.

I then couldn't help but ask her the question that had been pressing in my mind since the last time I saw her - this "Dustystorm" name being one I had heard come out of Goldenshine's mouth before, and not in a context I particularly liked. "Um... so... what is the deal between the two of you, if I can ask?"

As Goldenshine's eyes immediately lit up, I actually felt my heart sink a little as I could easily tell what she was going to say to me. "Well, I don't think that you'll be too surprised, however..." she answered, a purr clearly rising in her throat. "We officially became mates just a couple of days ago."

Although my former mate was completely right in that I should have expected it, I simultaneously felt as bowled over as I would be if Crowfeather walked up to me, gave me a lick on the cheek, and told me that he felt blessed to be able to call me his son.

I honestly don't know what I'm shocked about... I realized as this news continued to process - news that for some reason made me feel as if I was swimming in a pool of bramble thorns. *My mouse-brained head actually encouraged this relationship to some extent!*

I still remembered very clearly the conversation that had happened between Goldenshine and me the last time that we had spoken to each other. I actually had very clearly noticed this... *Dustystorm's* feelings for Goldenshine. I mean, I'm no genius - any cat would think it was obvious.

And, for some reason, I had pointed this out to her. *I told her that I saw potential for them to be mates!* I thought to myself in amazement. *Why did I do that?*

I then let out a sigh, giving a single flick of my ear as I quickly

could answer my own question. *I suppose I had it in my mind that they probably sparked a connection that wouldn't go anywhere... Wow, was I wrong.*

I then had to keep myself from shifting around uncomfortably - the thought of Goldenshine being with another tom being a weird, weird thought. "Wow, I... wow," I finally forced out, hardly being able to find any words to say in reply. "Goldenshine, that's-"

Almost thankfully, the she-cat cut me off. "I know!" she then exclaimed. "I mean, he's absolutely wonderful. And you were right... there was definitely something there."

I then couldn't help but close my eyes, but I kept my ears open as Goldenshine spoke her next words. "Speaking of..." she went on somewhat hesitantly. "...Can I ask you about Heathertail?"

My eyes flew back open. "Me and Heathertail?"

Goldenshine eagerly nodded back at me. "Yeah!" she then squealed, giving me a wink that I couldn't help but purr at. "You're not the only one who can sense a spark. I've noticed that you two have been spending a lot of time together lately."

For a moment, I could do nothing but stare back at the golden brown tabby, racking my brain for what to say in reply. "Oh... yeah!" I eventually meowed. "Yes, she's great. We're training our apprentices together, and it's..."

I paused for a moment before going on. "It's a lot of fun. She's a great she-cat, really."

I then closed my eyes once again, taking a deep, uncomfortable breath. *I mean, it's not exactly a lie...* "Um... but what about Swiftpaw?" I then pressed, desperate to change the subject.

I then shook my head quickly, holding back a hiss. *So desperate that you forgot how to speak correctly.* "How is Swiftpaw?"

I then flicked my ears in surprise as I looked back up at Goldenshine to see that she suddenly seemed to look equally as uncomfortable as I had felt hearing about Dustystorm, or talking

about Heathertail. "Well, he's... fine. He's just fine!" she answered after a moment. "He definitely brings something new every day."

Hm... I thought as I felt my eyes narrowing once again. *That's a very different answer than she gave me the last time that we talked.*

But however much Goldenshine's words peeked my curiosity, I simply waited for her to go on. "I..." she then began, her head beginning to shake slowly as she met my gaze. "I can still hardly believe that you've never met him."

For a moment, those words almost felt as if a cat had clawed me across the face. "Me too," I nearly whispered - a brief image of Swiftpaw flashing through my mind, the last time I had seen him being the night he was born. *The night that I also lost my three other kits...*

My eyes screwed shut as I felt a sharp pang of regret. *That loss was bad enough, and then I wasn't able to see the one kit that lived. I really can't believe that I've never met him,* I then thought. *My own son...*

I then opened my eyes once again just in time to catch Goldenshine's gaze wiping over with immense excitement. "Hey... but now that he's an apprentice, you might get to see him at a Gathering, maybe?"

For some reason, that thought gave me a strong spark of hope... not only would I get to finally meet Swiftpaw, my son, but getting to see the son that we had together... *that we'd always have together...*

I then held back a bitter grunt. *I wonder if Dustystorm and Goldenshine will ever have kits?*

I then quickly pushed that thought away. I don't want to think that far. "I'd really like that," I finally replied to Goldenshine, giving her a genuinely warm look.

And Goldenshine returned it, causing the fur along my back to tingle for a heartbeat. "Great StarClan, me too. I-"

"Hey, Goldenshine!"

I then stood up, my fur beginning to bristle at the new voice that called out from the ThunderClan side of the stream. I looked out into the forest briefly before looking back at Goldenshine, who, for some StarClan-forsaken reason didn't seem to feel even a twinge of panic.

In fact, all she did was glance back at me just briefly. "Hold on," she whispered before turning around to face the forest. "Yeah!?"

And once the voice called out again, I couldn't help but let out a low hiss as I realized that this was likely Dustystorm speaking. "Where did you run off to?" he called out again. "I caught a *huge* squirrel - you have to see it!"

Goldenshine then purred with amusement, flashing me a look full of humor before looking back towards the forest once again. "Oh, I believe you! I'll be right there!"

She then finally turned back to me, her gray eyes still glittering as she shook her head slowly. "Great StarClan..." she murmured, her face then washing over with warmth and sadness at the same time. "Well, it looks like I have to go - Dustystorm most definitely will want to brag about his squirrel as soon as possible!"

I hesitantly stood up, the regret welling up in my heart almost seeming to physically prevent me from doing so. "Ah, then I'll make myself scarce," I meowed, lowering my voice just slightly as I began to back away. "You probably don't want Dustystorm knowing that I was here."

I then furrowed my eyebrows as I watched Goldenshine actually flick her ears in surprise, as if I had just told her that a bird was laying eggs on her head. "Oh, don't worry about that, Breezepelt!" she reassured me, to my complete bewilderment. "He... he knows what we had - I told him about it."

What!?

That news actually made my stomach twist, and I couldn't help but feel a pang of betrayal at the thought of the she-cat sharing our secret with someone - let alone someone so new to the Clans.

"Really?" was all that I was able to force out.

"I hope that's okay... I..." she then hesitated slightly. "I couldn't stand to keep any more secrets after..."

She then closed her eyes for a moment, letting out what sounded like a frustrated sigh. "Well, you know," she eventually continued. "And I am definitely going to tell him that I ran into you, so there's no need to panic."

I found that I couldn't reply immediately as I let the reality of this situation settle. *Dustystorm knew about what we had...* I then had to hold back a snort. *And yet he still pursed you? Those kittypet minds are all bent out of shape.*

But I then realized that I couldn't let my jealous, bitter thoughts completely take over. Honestly, it was admirable that Goldenshine felt that she could and should be more open with her second mate. *She... she must've learned her lesson after all of the secrets that the two of us once carried together.*

I then screwed my eyes shut again, forcing myself to ignore the strong, almost unbearable pang of regret that I suddenly felt as I looked back at my former mate. *Unfortunately, I definitely can't say the same...*

I then let my eyes open once again, meeting Goldenshine's gaze once again. "Okay, then. No problem," I finally murmured, taking a look back towards WindClan territory before giving a final nod to Goldenshine, pushing down all of my negative feeling that were threatening to rise up. "I'll see you soon."

Goldenshine returned the nod, her gray eyes reflecting beautifully against the moonlight. "Goodnight, Breezepelt," the she-cat whispered.

Then, without waiting for a reply, she turned around and pelted into the forest, disappearing from my sight within heartbeats.

Goodbye, Goldenshine.

And for a moment, I found myself just staring off at the place that

she had vanished, having to take the time to process every single feeling that had sparked within me just through this brief encounter with my former mate - angry, regretful, jealous, happy and sad ones... what I thought was initially such a lighthearted conversation had sparked so much within me - and I hated all of it.

But eventually, I let out a long, heavy sigh before finally standing up and beginning to pad deeper into my territory. *Geez... at first it seemed that Goldenshine was a distraction from this nuisance of a patrol that I'm on...* I thought as I crawled through the same shrubs that I'd traveled through before. *But now it seems that this patrol is going to be a distraction from Goldenshine.*

However, I'd just barely made it through the shrubs when I came to another abrupt halt - coming face to face with every single cat on my patrol, just standing there and waiting for me.

Well, nevermind.

I could just barely see Heathertail, Furzepaw, and Boulderpaw's fearful expressions out of the corner of my eye, but the only thing that I could focus on was Crowfeather - his blue eyes blazing like a wildfire.

The sight made my stomach twist, but there was no way I was going to let him know that. "Don't even bother," I muttered to my father as I brushed past all four of the cats. "I don't need to explain myself to you."

Crowfeather let out an angry hiss behind me. "That is exactly what you're supposed to do, and that's exactly what you're *going* to do!"

I then heard his fast pawsteps following behind me. "What were you thinking? Heathertail, Furzepaw and I came back to the hollow, and you and Boulderpaw weren't there, and we come to this clearing to find Boulderpaw *by himself in the middle of the night*!"

I then hissed, taking a step back as Crowfeather leaped forward, intercepting me as he let his infuriated gaze burn into mine. "What were you *thinking*?"

I forced myself to stand my ground. "Why are you making such a big deal out of this? All I did was check on a noise that I heard at the border!"

To Crowfeather, that didn't help my case at all. "And you couldn't at least bring Boulderpaw with you?"

I began to reply sharply. "I..."

But I quickly trailed off, realizing that I had no reasonable way to explain why I couldn't take my apprentice with me. "I... no."

"Why not?"

I then closed my eyes for a moment, still having no idea how to explain myself without the older tom getting suspicious. "I..."

But unfortunately, I probably had picked the easiest way.

The dark gray tom narrowed his eyes back at me. "Did you find the thing that was making noise?"

"Yes..." I answered, nodding quickly. "It. it was just a dumb shrew on the other side of the stream."

I then couldn't help but finally take a pawstep back as Crowfeather didn't speak for what felt like an entire lifetime. Instead, he simply stared at me - for some reason, a wary, yet knowing gleam in his eye. "You know what? I don't to hear any more."

I then raised my eyebrows as he quickly whipped himself around, beginning to pad in the direction of the WindClan camp. "You're lucky that I don't tell Onestar about this," he called back, beckoning everyone to follow him with his tail. "Let's get back to camp."

I straightened up, ignoring Heathertail's worried gaze once again as she and the other apprentices began to follow my father back to camp. And once I actually began to follow as well, I trailed back as far as I could without Crowfeather thinking that I had run off.

But at the same time, I want to stay as far from that mange-pelt as possible, I thought angrily. Great StarClan, I wonder if any other cat

deals with a father like this - one that makes you feel like you can never do anything right. I then let out a huff. I hope that I wouldn't be like that as a father.

I then raised my eyebrows, my tail raising in the air. *Well, I am one, I suppose...* I then realized, another image of Swiftpaw as a newborn kit flashing in my mind, followed by images of what I imagined as life with a kit - playing outside in camp, teaching him fighting moves... playing mossball... *Hm... Crowfeather would give me a hard time about fatherhood too if he knew about it...*

I then blinked a few times, lifting my head to the sky as a genuinely contemplated a certain question. *I wonder what I would be like as a father?* I asked myself before letting out a snort. *All I know, is that I have a father that doesn't respect or care for me at all. Who knows? I'd maybe be exactly the same.*

I then stopped in my tracks completely, not caring if I trailed behind the group anymore. *But who cares about that?* I then pressed to myself.

I then let out a hiss, batting at a pile of leaves just in front of me. *Who cares about any of it?*

I then sighed, lifting my head slowly so that I could look up at the sky, which happened to not be filled with too many stars that night. I have several, several other cats that constantly give me the approval that I deserve. *That's all that I should care about.*

I then felt a new rush of adrenaline run through my pelt as I began to walk again. *Do I care that I don't know my son? Do I care that Goldenshine has a new mate? Maybe a little. There was even a small part of me that held out for us possibly being together again.*

I began to walk even faster. *But I have to give up on that now - it's not worth it anymore.*

I then slowed down in my travels once again. *But what about Heathertail?*

I had to admit, Goldenshine was slightly onto something when she

had mentioned the light brown tabby she-cat to me - she was a beautiful, kind, and very noble warrior that stood by my side no matter what...

I then shook my head quickly. *But she shouldn't be my priority right now,* I then told myself.

I then looked up to the sky once again. *I've joined the Dark Forest, and that should take first.*

At this thought, I quickened my pace again. *And when it comes to Goldenshine... I need to start seeing her as an enemy. The time that we shared is long over, and her moving on is just a blatant reminder of that.*

That thought hurt me slightly, because yes, I cared about Goldenshine, and probably always would, but I had to accept that things would, and couldn't be the same anymore.

I then stopped in my tracks yet again. *It will be hard to do at first, but I can't crack down with her anymore. It has never done anything good for me.*

I then narrowed my eyes as I looked back towards ThunderClan territory, a shiver running down my spine as I recalled the encounter I'd had many moons ago with the cat that, at the time, had been greatly feared by everyone before his death. *Promises and deals were made, that were eventually broken... because of me and my stupid heart...* I recalled.

Then, like a wave of water running over pebbles and washing them away, my guilt and regret was washed away and replaced with deep determination. *Among everyone else, I can't crack down with Goldenshine anymore,* I repeated to myself. *I already have once, and I won't make that mistake again.*

With a Cherry on Top

[image]

Read on to witness a certain beloved she-cat's warrior ceremony...

Cherrypaw's POV

Chapter 1

"Cherrypaw, wake up! Wake up, wake up, wake up!"

I was jerked awake as violently as grass blown in a storm as I suddenly felt two paws shake me by the shoulders.

And the sound of my lovely mentor's voice yowl into my ear.

"Cherrypaw, you have to wake up!"

Still half-asleep, I let out a yawn and rolled over onto my belly quite frankly still trying to process consciousness as Goldenshine proceeded to shake me even harder. "Goldenshine..." I then moaned as my mouth opened up into a large yawn. "What in the name of StarClan are you doing?"

"What do you mean, 'what am I doing'?" Goldenshine exclaimed, and I opened my eyes fully to meet her surprisingly alarmed gray gaze. "The camp is on fire!"

"*What?*"

I immediately jumped up onto my paws, the adrenaline rushing through my body, and all remains of grogginess disappearing as my mentor's words immediately set in. "Oh my goodness!" I then breathed before beginning to make a run for it. "Then we need to get out of here!"

My heart was pounding, and everything around me seemed to

disappear as I was bracing myself for the horrible smell of smoke to flood through my nose, and images of a completely ash-filled and destroyed camp to stand in front of me.

But I was bewildered when I suddenly felt a tail wrap itself around my own, stopping me from going anywhere. "We don't need to do any of that," I then heard Goldenshine mutter from behind me.

I stopped in my tracks, looking back over my shoulder at the older she-cat. "Huh?"

I then blinked in surprise as Goldenshine let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "I was joking," she then purred, walking up to me and giving me a light nudge. "I just wanted to wake you up!"

For a moment, I could do nothing but blink a few times as I still tried to process life and its happenings. "...What?" I meowed breathily.

"I had to wake you up!"

"*...What?*"

"How long is this going to take?"

I then shook my head quickly, my head finally becoming fully sound as I actually gained full consciousness. "Great StarClan, Goldenshine!" I then meowed, nudging the she-cat right back as she continued to purr. "You can wake me up without telling me that the camp is on fire!"

I then scanned my eyes around the den, continuing to process all of the reasons why the camp most definitely hadn't been on fire in the first place - for one, almost every single apprentice was still in their nest, as calm as could be as they stared back at me, their eyes glowing with sympathy and humor. "Were you all in on this?" I couldn't help but ask my Clanmates.

Emberpaw stood up in her nest as she flashed me an apologetic look through her hazel eyes. "Mayyyyyybe a little..." she murmured, shuffling her paws back and forth.

Her brother, Wrenpaw, was already standing up in his nest, gathering up stray moss that was in his area. He then met me with his harsh pale blue gaze. "My sister forced me into it against my will."

"Sorry, Cherrypaw!" Lightningpaw then meowed, his eyes filled with genuine regret as he stretched out in his own nest. "I barely got a chance to stop her."

I then turned my head to my right, as I heard my brother, Molepaw, let out a snort. "To be honest," he then murmured, "I almost thought about waking you up in the same way."

"What? Why?" I then exclaimed, my voice full of laughter. I then stretched out as my mouth gaped opened up into a yawn once again. "What's the occasion?"

I then flicked my ears as I heard Goldenshine gasp, and I felt her give me another nudge. "Are you kidding?" she then nearly squealed.

"Are *you?*" I replied, my voice still full of purrs of amusement.

I then nearly stepped back, startled, as Goldenshine began to brush her tail right in my face. "No!" she then yowled enthusiastically. "It's your freaking warrior ceremony today, you mouse-brain!"

Great StarClan!

I then gasped, blinking a few more times, almost as if to check that the words I had just heard were real. "Oh my goodness, that's right..."

I then couldn't help but jump up in the air, squealing with excitement as it finally fully set in. "Ah, that's right!"

Somehow I had already forgotten about the last thing that I had thought about when I'd gone to sleep last night - the thing that had almost consumed my mind since I'd first had the ability to think at all. *My warrior ceremony...* I thought, my heart beginning to race all over again, but not from fear at all. *After all of these moons, after all of the learning and the work... I made it!*

I then looked back at Goldenshine, meeting her equally lively gaze. *With how much fun I had, and with how much I learned, sometimes I forgot that I was even working towards something else!* I then realized, my head practically feeling light as so many warm thoughts swarmed through it. *But now it's here! Oh, it's here!*

I then couldn't help but begin to knead my paws into the ground as everyone around me began to stir. Wrenpaw had begun to make his exit just as soon as I'd squealed, with Lightningpaw following just behind him, his yellow eyes gleaming with humor. "Great StarClan, not her too," the brown tabby tom muttered as he narrowed his eyes towards me and Goldenshine.

I ignored the tom's comment as I then practically pelted over to my brother's nest. "Molepaw, can you believe it?"

"Yes," he muttered to me in reply, stretching one last time before quickly padding over to the den entrance. "Exactly why I was up before you were."

I then watched as his tail disappeared through the brambles, and I could help but feel an excited, but nervous rush as I could already hear the voices of many cats coming from outside. "Now, come on!" the brown and cream tom then called out. "It's going to start any moment now!"

Emberpaw followed closely behind him, looking back at me briefly as she flashed me an encouraging, warm look. "Good luck, Cherrypaw! I love you!"

I let out a purr of amusement before replying to the she-cat. "Love you!"

I then took a deep breath, returning my gaze to my mentor once again, who seemed to be trying not to explode as she stared back at me. "If I wasn't so excited," I then murmured to her, cocking an eyebrow, "I would tell you that you are a cruel cat and that I am so glad that you won't be my mentor anymore."

Goldenshine did nothing but roll her eyes back at me and snort. "Oh, please - now *you're* joking."

I let out a huff, rolling my eyes as well. *While Goldenshine is quite the goof, she always speaks the truth!* I thought. *Well, except when she tells me that the camp is on fire...* "Yes, I am," I admitted.

I then felt a rush of gratitude, and I began to knead my paws into the ground once again. "And I'm so excited," I went on, having to hold back another squeal, "And truthfully, I'm so thankful and you're the reason I've gotten to this point, and-"

I then cut myself off as Goldenshine and I both squealed simultaneously and hopped up and down like two quarter-moon-old kits.

"Whoa!"

I looked over my shoulder as I heard a voice come from the den entrance, and I felt my heart nearly skip a beat when I quickly recognized the dark gray pelt of Swiftflight. *Who quite likely has just been deafened...*

I then exchanged an amused glance with Goldenshine as the tom bent down and picked up his shrew, which for some reason was on the ground. "Wow, I did not think that two cats had the physical capability to be this loud," he purred through a full mouth as he then padded into the den, his gray-blue gaze locking with mine.

A purr then began to rise in my own throat as Swiftflight then wrapped his tail around my back. "You made me drop your prey - I hope you're happy," he then muttered.

I then closed my eyes, taking in the tom's scent as he bent his head down to give mine a lick. *Well, you do bring it to me every day...* I thought happily, pressing even closer to Swiftflight as I reflected on how he had indeed gone out of his way every morning since the Dark Forest battle to bring me my first meal of the day. *So, I think he definitely gets a pass just once...*

I then raised my eyebrows in surprise as Swiftflight then lifted his head, meeting Goldenshine with an inquisitive gaze. "So, did you do it?"

Goldenshine snorted, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "Duh!"

I then let out a gasp, pulling away from Swiftflight as I stared at back at him, astonished. "You were in on it too?" I exclaimed to him, pretending to look genuinely offended, although my voice was full of laughter.

I then let my gaze switch from one cat to the other. "I shouldn't have to feel so betrayed on a day like this! Especially not by my mentor and my..."

I then raised my eyebrows as my gaze went back to Swiftflight, whose eyes were gleaming with humor and curiosity as he stared back at me. "My... dearest friend?"

Swiftflight tilted his head to the side as he let out a purr of amusement. "That works?" he then replied as I continued to laugh. I then felt another large wave of affection as he then touched his head to my muzzle, the purr continuing to rumble in his throat. "I hope that the shrew is okay - I thought that you could at least get one bite out of it before your ceremony."

I looked gratefully back at the tom as I twinned my tail with his. "It always is, Swiftflight," I meowed to him just before giving him a lick on the cheek. "Thank you."

Swiftflight then gave me a quick lick on the nose. "Always," he then nearly whispered, causing my heart to nearly flip upside down, as he always did. *And what amazes me is that some cats in this Clan can't even begin to comprehend how he could possibly do it...*

"So," the tom then went on as he then took a step back, taking a nervous glance at his mother as she stared back at the two of us, her eyes narrowed as she shook her head slowly and smirked. "How are you feeling?"

I let out a sigh as another wave of excitement took over, almost making my chest feel as it was going to fly away from the rest of my body as I continued to think about the moment that was just heartbeats away. "Great StarClan... I can barely put it into words!" I answered fervently. "I... I just can't believe that I finally made it!"

I then looked over at Goldenshine, flashing her a reassuring glance as I heard her snort with amusement. "Well, I most definitely can believe it, but... wow!"

I then looked back at Swiftflight as I felt him put the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "So can I," he then murmured. I then couldn't help but purr as my gaze locked with his once again. "Y-You deserve it, Cherrypaw. I-believe me, I'm..."

I then purred quietly with amusement as the dark gray tom then shut his eyes, hesitating and taking a deep breath. "I'm..."

"-excited that you're moving to the warriors den," Goldenshine murmured, her eyes narrowed as she stared back at him.

Swiftflight let out a quiet hiss, shooting a glare back at his mother. "Shut up."

Goldenshine wasn't fazed by his irritated, and simply hardened her gaze. "Never," she then muttered.

Swiftflight then sighed, flashing an annoyed, yet affectionate glance towards Goldenshine before returning his gaze to me - which washed over with uncertainty once again. "I... I'm-"

Goldenshine took a step towards us, her eyes glowing with humor as she cut her son off again. "Here, seriously, I'll help - Cherrypaw, you are the most beautiful, kind, and smartest she-cat that I know, and you deserve this more than all of the apprentices in the forest," she meowed, and I couldn't help but quietly purr as she went on. "But honestly, overall, I'm just *really* excited that you'll be able to cuddle with me in the warriors den. I-"

This time, Swiftflight simply shut his eyes once again, raising his tail as if to ask for silence. "I once again ask you to shut up - just give me a moment."

I then watched the tom take a deep breath and opened his eyes, and I felt my stomach twist up into a knot as I looked into his warm, sincere gray-blue gaze. "I'm so, so excited for you, and you really, really deserve this," he then meowed softly as he twinned his tail

back with mine. "I love you, and I'm so proud of you."

Overwhelmed by his words, I let out a purr and lightly touched my muzzle to Swiftflight's cheek. "Thank you, Swiftflight. I love you too." *So much.*

The purr in my throat continued to rise as Swiftflight then pulled me into his fur, and his scent flooded into my nose once again. Sometimes moments like this still made me feel as overwhelmed and excited as if I were experiencing them for the first time, *because... there had been a moment... many moments, where I doubted that it would ever happen...*

Although I had been scared to admit for moons and moons, I had had feelings for Swiftflight since the two of us were kits in the nursery. And while he had always been kind to me, he never seemed to reflect the amount of affection that I'd felt towards him.

I'd later found out from him that that was a result of his many nights in the Dark Forest, and it wasn't until he left his training there that he and I were able to grow incredibly close. *There were still burdens, though...* I told myself, a chill nearly running down my spine as I looked back on it all. *Between my mother initially not approving of Swiftflight whatsoever, and Swiftflight being afraid to speak up... I did wonder if a future for us was even possible, however...*

I then leaned closer to Swiftflight, digging my muzzle into his chest fur. *We got past it all, and now we're closer than ever.* And while we definitely considered ourselves more than friends, we didn't want to take it too far yet, with me still being an apprentice that spent my days training.

But that didn't bother me at all - we both had decided where we wanted to take our relationship once I became a warrior. *But either way, I am so, so thankful for him,* I then thought. *I'm so glad that I have him and his support on this special day. And after today, it won't be as just a very close friend anymore...*

"Um..."

My eyes then widened, and Swiftflight and I broke away from each

other as Goldenshine broke through the silence. Her eyes were still narrowed, and gleaming with humor. "Hm, and as much as I love standing here and watching the sunshine radiate around the two of you - we should probably head out."

I exchanged a slightly embarrassed look with Swiftflight. "Agreed!" I exclaimed, bending down and taking a quick bite of the shrew Swiftflight had brought me before following behind Goldenshine, who was already making her way towards the den entrance. "Let's get out of here!"

I practically burst out of the apprentices den, already having run ahead of both Swiftflight and Goldenshine as I'd made my exit. I stood up straight, feeling the warmth on my fur as the sunlight burst through the ThunderClan forest around our camp.

So many emotions seemed to be rushing through my blood as I then began padding deeper into camp - nerves, disbelief, excitement, exhilaration. As overwhelming as it all was, I knew that I could only embrace it.

I then stopped in my tracks for a moment, my ears flicking with surprise. *Great StarClan!*

Although I'd been aware of the several voices that filled the camp just heartbeats before, I was still shocked by how many cats were already gathered in front of the Highledge, ready for Bramblestar to begin the ceremony.

The brown tabby ThunderClan leader was sitting just under the large rock, speaking with his mate, Squirrelflight, his deputy, Lilypetal, and her mate, Thornclaw. All but a few cats had left their dens, and even Purdy - ThunderClan's only elder - was sitting outside of his den, his amber eyes warm and eager as he stared up at the Highledge.

And I couldn't help but let out a snort of amusement as I noticed two more of ThunderClan's apprentices - Lilypaw and Seedpaw, who appeared to have missed Goldenshine's prank on me from just earlier, and where speaking to their parents, Sorreltail and Brackenfur.

And just as I had come out, my parents - Poppyfrost and Berrynose - and even my foster sister, Snowstorm, seemed to have been waiting for me as they all seemed to be facing my direction, their tails twitching eagerly.

As I began to run up to them, I let out a mrrow of laughter as I noticed that Molepaw was already with them, who was pushing Poppyfrost away as she attempted to fix his fur before the ceremony. Berrynose then grabbed one of Molepaw's legs with his tail and pulled him away, seeming to tell his mate that Molepaw could do it himself.

Which I seriously doubted.

When I finally made it up to them, I let out another purr as I watched my father's blue eyes light up. "There she is!"

Poppyfrost was still glaring at Berrynose when he'd begun to speak, so her own blue eyes washed over with surprise once she'd processed his words. "Oh my goodness, Cherrypaw, get over here!" I then screwed my eyes shut as she gave me a rough lick on the head. "Where have you been?"

I then raised my eyebrows as my mother looked inquisitively at Goldenshine, who had followed just behind me with Swiftflight next to her. "Goldenshine, did you really do it?" my tortoiseshell mother then sighed. "Great StarClan, you could have had her spooked for the rest of the day!"

I stared back at my mother in amazement, purring with amusement once again. "Was the entire Clan in on scaring me half to death on the day I become a warrior?"

Poppyfrost didn't reply, and simply stared back at me with narrowed eyes. "What in the name of StarClan are you chewing on?" She asked me, likely referring to the shrew that I was still working on.

Her eyes then widened with bewilderment, and I couldn't help but give her a wry smile as she then meowed, "Are you *eating* right before your ceremony starts?"

Beside me, I saw Swiftflight's eyes widen with obvious fear. "Whoops."

I sniffed, giving the dark gray tom a light nudge. I couldn't help but feel a bit amusement by the genuine fear that Swiftflight still sometimes felt when it came to Poppyfrost. "Oh, come on, Swiftflight. It's not your fault."

I then looked back at my mother once again to find her blue eyes gleaming with humor and mischief as she stared back at him. "In my eyes, it always is." She then muttered.

I then held back a *mrrow* of laughter as I watched Swiftflight shoot a hard glance at Snowstorm, who was purring with amusement next to him. He then looked over at Poppyfrost, his own gaze reflecting my mother's. "I've never been so touched in my life."

"I tend to do that," Poppyfrost then meowed, shrugging as she took a step towards Swiftflight.

I flicked my ears as Swiftflight also took a step towards her. "Don't worry, just for you, I'll let her starve from now on."

Poppyfrost's eyes slowly narrowed, a large smirk still on her face. "You're truly the best," she murmured. I then exchanged an amused glance with Swiftflight the tortoiseshell then sighed, rolling her eyes as she sat down and wrapped her tail around her paws. "And I suppose that it's nice that you bring my daughter prey every morning."

Swiftflight flashed me a warm glance before looking back at Poppyfrost. "Sure. It's the least that I can do for my..."

I raised my eyebrows as Swiftflight then hesitated, probably *somewhat* intimidated by the death stare that my mother was giving him. "Um, my..." He then looked at me briefly once again. "My... closest companion?"

Poppyfrost gave the smallest nod, but her expression stayed the same. "Correct."

I then let out a small purr as Swiftflight then wrapped his tail

around my back, pulling me closer to him. "But... you'll allow me to call her something else after she becomes a warrior, right?"

"I suppose."

Oh, right... I thought, watching as Swiftflight then gave a grateful nod to my mother. *The other reason why we haven't quite been able to become full mates yet!* While Poppyfrost had more than given her approval of the two of us already, and while she and Swiftflight had actually been able to develop a very close and playful relationship with each other after so much tension, it was clear that she still was going to keep a close eye on him, and on the two of us until the day she joined StarClan.

I then let my gaze flit from Poppyfrost to Swiftflight, so much warmth and happiness rising in my heart as I once again thought about how far we had come. *But honestly, as long as we still have her blessing in some form, I'm still more than happy.*

I then let my gaze fall on Molepaw as I heard him snort. "I'm just picturing Cherrypaw chewing in Bramblestar's face as he gives her her warrior name."

I raised my eyebrows as I then watched Poppyfrost exchange a worried glance with Berrynose, who was shaking his head slowly. "Oh my goodness, Cherrypaw, please finish chewing."

I purred with amusement yet again, finally forcing myself to swallow the *very* large bite I had taken from the shrew. "Don't worry, I'm done!"

Berrynose then nudged his mate as I gave a shake of my fur. "Hey, even if we weren't certain of her capabilities of a warrior, we at least know that our daughter can eat properly."

Goldenshine, who was now sitting nearby with her own mate, Dustystorm, let out a snort. "Hey, that's the kind of mentor that I am!"

Then, as all of us shared a purr of amusement, everyone around us seemed to be bringing their own attention to the Highledge -

Bramblestar finally seemed to be ready to start the ceremony, leaping up to the top of the Highledge while Lilypetal stayed at the bottom, and Squirrelflight and Thornclaw joined the rest of the crowd. *Oh my StarClan... oh my StarClan!*

I looked back at Swiftflight and Goldenshine, who had settled just behind me. Swiftflight was sitting up straight and dignified just as he always did, staring admirably back at me. And the biggest smile began to emerge on my face as he then mouthed, "I love you," to me silently.

I mouthed it right back, then having to hold back another purr as Snowstorm, who was still beside Swiftflight, gave her best friend a nudge and a wink before settling down next to her former mentor, Icecloud.

I then averted my gaze to my mentor, Goldenshine, who sadly would only be my mentor for a few more heartbeats. Her gray eyes were gleaming with pride as she eagerly prompted me forward with her tail.

I stared back at them for just one more moment, practically overwhelmed with affection and gratitude, before finally turning around, padding forward to stand next to my brother and giving him a light nudge.

The camp had now fallen completely silent, waiting for Bramblestar to speak his first words. *Goodness, it's already going by so quickly...* I thought, filled with so much panic, nerves, and excitement at the same time. *This is it...*

Chapter 2

When Bramblestar finally began to speak, every single other thing that existed around me seemed to disappear completely. And although basically every single cat in ThunderClan had already gathered in the clearing, it was only by obligation that Bramblestar then called out, "All cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Highledge!"

Oh, dear goodness...

Molepaw and I couldn't help but exchange another glance as the camp is then filled with every single member of ThunderClan - late risers, as well as the queens and kits from the nursery came out - all ready to see the ceremony. *They're all here for the two of us... how amazing is that?*

Once the brown tabby leader was certain that he had everyone's attention, he then went on, the vibrations of his voice almost seeming to cause my heart to pound more strongly. "This morning, I have the honor of making two new warriors," he meowed. A chill then ran down my spine as his head then lowered, and his amber eyes fell on where me and Molepaw were sitting. "These two apprentices have only thrived through what any cat would consider to be a very tough time, being strong through a threat that we never thought we would face."

I then sat up straighter, feeling a rush of pride as Bramblestar then nodded to us, his eyes full of gratitude. "There's no question of whether or not these cats deserve to be made warriors. So..."

The ThunderClan leader then leaped down from the Highledge, then proceeding to beckon to us with his tail. "Cherrypaw and Molepaw, can you two please step forward?"

I could tell that every cat's gaze on me now, and I could almost feel the pride surrounding my friends and family behind me. And almost as if Molepaw and I had coordinated it, the two of us then walked forward to meet Bramblestar at the exact same time, and I couldn't help but flash my brother a brief look of affection. *While some cats with no siblings would maybe be happy to have their ceremony all to themselves, I don't think I could be more happy or thankful to have him next to me, and that we're able to experience this together...*

I then returned my gaze to Bramblestar as he broke through the silence once again, lifting his head up to the sky. "I, Bramblestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these two apprentices. They have both trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn."

Bramblestar then lowered his head, his amber gaze falling

specifically on Molepaw now. "Molepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

I glanced at Molepaw to see him dipping his head. "I do," he then meowed clearly.

I then felt myself feeling almost dizzy with excitement and shock, my vision almost going blurry as Bramblestar then shifted his gaze towards me and met me with his typical warm, welcoming gaze. "And Cherrypaw," he then went on, "Do you also promise to uphold the warrior code, and protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

I couldn't be more certain that my answer to my leader was fully honest. "I do," I meowed clearly, to my surprise - I've been trying to keep myself from squealing again this entire time, oh my StarClan!

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you two your warrior names," Bramblestar then declared. He then nodded to Molepaw once again. "Molepaw, from this moment on you will be known as Molewhisker," he then went on proudly, stepping forward and putting the tip of his tail on my brother's shoulder. "ThunderClan honors your strength and initiative, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan. And Cherrypaw..."

I then straightened myself up once again, my heart pounding in my ears as Bramblestar then made his way toward me, now putting his tail on my shoulder. "Cherrypaw," he then continued. "From this moment on you will be known as Cherryfall. StarClan honors your compassion and spirit, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Cherryfall... I love it so much!

Just as I leaned forward to lick the brown tabby leader's shoulder, I could hear the yowls and cheers of my Clanmates echoing my new name just behind me. "Molewhisker! Cherryfall! Molewhisker! Cherryfall!"

For a moment, I could do nothing but process as the celebratory

yowls echoed around the camp, making my fur tingle as if the wind was brushing through it, touching every single piece of hair on my pelt. *I'm a warrior now! I made it! Oh my goodness, so much is going to change!*

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the newly named Molewhisker disappear from my side, running behind me to meet our parents. And right in front of me, I could see Bramblestar padding up to meet Squirrelflight, who gave him an affectionate nudge as she seemed to be giving him praise.

I flicked my ears and nearly let out a gasp as this made me realize something. *Wait a moment... this was Bramblestar's first ceremony as ThunderClan's leader, wasn't it?* I thought, my mouth dropping. *Molewhisker and I were the first cats that he made warriors! How special is that?*

I then blinked, letting out a huff as I finally turned away from the Highledge. *And my Clanmates will certainly think that I'm a little special if I just stand here all day...* I thought jokingly as I immediately turned to see all of the proud expressions of my family - each and every one of them looking so genuinely excited for me.

Poppyfrost was the first one to run up to me, a purr rumbling in her throat as she gave me a lick on the head. "Congratulations," she meowed warmly as she then pulled Molewhisker into our little embrace. I was amused to only see him resist just slightly. "Too both of you."

I then gave a sniff as my mother then nodded over to Berrynose, who was sitting just a tail-length away with his blue eyes gleaming. "Your father and I couldn't be more proud," Poppyfrost then purred, giving us a wink. "He just won't get anywhere near you in order to express that."

After Molewhisker, Poppyfrost and I erupted into laughter, my heart was then overcome with sadness as I then noticed a certain golden brown tabby pelt out of the corner of my eye.

I pulled away from my mother and brother to see Goldenshine approaching from behind me, her gray eyes glittering with extreme

pride and happiness, but sorrow at the same time. "I think you'd be able to see how proud I was even if I was a whole earth's distance away."

As I then felt another wave full of heartache, I couldn't help but run up and press myself against Goldenshine, and I had to screw my eyes shut when I felt the older she-cat wrap her tail around my back. "Cherryfall," she then meowed softly, "you were truly the best first apprentice that I could have ever asked for."

"And you were the best mentor," I meowed in reply, my voice hoarse with grief. *But she was more than just a mentor... she was a true friend...* I thought as I then pulled away to look into my former mentor's eyes. "Thank you so much for everything, Goldenshine. I'm going to miss our training sessions so much."

"Yes, thank you, Goldenshine."

I then looked to my side to see Poppyfrost padding up to the two of us, her eyes showing as much gratitude as I felt inside. "You made her best qualities grow even stronger, and..."

I then felt my heart warm up just a bit as my mother then met my gaze. "I know she'll be ready for whatever she has to face, and I won't have to worry." I then flicked my ears with amusement as she then let out a snort. "Even though I will, anyway."

After a *mrrow* of laughter, Goldenshine then meowed, "It was my pleasure."

The brown tabby she-cat then gave me a nudge, pulling me into her again with her tail. "Hey, and when it comes to those lost training sessions - you can be certain that we're going out on many expeditions in the future. There's always more to learn."

With those words, almost all of the sadness I'd been feeling immediately disappeared. "Aw, I would absolutely love that!"

I then raise my eyebrows with intrigue as Goldenshine then sniffed and rolled her eyes. "Well, and even if that wasn't a factor in getting opportunities to see each other - which is impossible - you also are

kiiiiinnnnddd of close to my son..."

I then let out a small purr as Goldenshine and Poppyfrost exchanged an amused glance, and Poppyfrost let out a small grunt. "Speaking of..." my mother muttered. With her eyes narrowed and a smirk on her face, she then nodded towards Swiftflight, who I noticed was standing just a little ways away from us. "What do you want?"

I could then hardly stand the cuteness as Swiftflight first seemed shocked by the attention being brought onto him, and secondly hesitantly stepped towards where I was standing. "Well..." he began warily. "I was hoping that I'd get a chance to congratulate my..."

He then nervously looked towards Poppyfrost, who was still staring him down. "My mate?"

I myself began to feel a little nervous as my mother then flicked her ears, exchanging a questioning glance with Goldenshine. Oh, dear... please. *Today has been so wonderful and perfect - don't let it stop now!*

To my relief and humor, Goldenshine simply shrugged and began to pad over to Dustystorm, who was speaking with his apprentice, Emberpaw over by the fresh-kill pile. "Hey, we both knew that it was coming!" she then called out.

Poppyfrost simply watched her for a moment, clearly also amused.

Then, her eyes landed on me and Swiftflight. I then flashed the gray-black tom a reassuring and warm glance as he then seemed to anxiously twin his tail with mine.

And then, after a few unbearable heartbeats, Poppyfrost finally gave a long sigh, then began to slowly pad away as well. "Your mate, indeed," she meowed just barely loud enough for me and Swiftflight to hear.

Swiftflight and I then couldn't help but exchange an excited glance as Poppyfrost ran up to meet Molewhisker, Berrynose and Rosepetal. "Congratulations again, Cherryfall!"

I then flashed my mother one last loving, grateful look before

looking back at Swiftflight. And of course, immediately my heart began to pound in my ears as I met his gray-blue gaze, and my stomach filled up with butterflies.

And for a moment, I seriously questioned if I was dreaming, because truthfully, this moment was something I had thought about and hoped for most of my life. "So..." I then began after a few moments, my gaze not leaving Swiftflight's. "You were hoping to congratulate your mate, huh?"

I then heard a purr beginning to rise in Swiftflight's throat as he then nearly whispered, "Yes."

He then simply stared back at me for another moment before shaking his head quickly, as if he was bringing himself out of a *really* cute daze. "Yes, I was."

As both of the purrs seemed to erupt in our throats, we both almost simultaneously stepped closer to each other and pressed against each other. I leaned my head into his white chest as he then wrapped his tail around me. "Congratulations, Cherry*fall,*" Swiftflight then whispered before pulling away to look into my eyes again. "You are the most beautiful, kind, and smartest she-cat that I know, and you deserve this more than all of the cats in the forest."

I couldn't help but purr with amusement at the tom quoting Goldenshine's mocking words from earlier, but I then proceeding to give Swiftflight another lick on the cheek. "Thank you, Swiftflight," I whispered back to him. "You're the sweetest ever."

Swiftflight touched his nose to my head. "Of course, and... I know," he then muttered, causing me to purr once again.

I then widened my eyes with concern as he seemed to hesitate. "And... while Goldenshine exaggerated a bit, of course..." he went on as he shuffled his paws back and forth. "I am... um... I am really excited for you to move to the warriors den with me."

I giggled at the tom's nerves. "Aw, don't worry, I am too!" I purred, brushing my tail along Swiftflight's flank to comfort him. "I really am."

I then simply stared reassuringly back at Swiftflight, letting him take a moment to hesitate and get his thoughts together - I knew by now how he acted when he did this - closing his eyes, shuffling his paws, even letting out little hisses of frustration as he sometimes struggled. It was what he did whatever he was trying to muster up the courage to say something that was out of his comfortable range.

It's one of the most precious things I've ever seen.

I then nodded, showing Swiftflight that I was listening when he finally took a deep breath and spoke. Although he still looked nervous, his eyes were warm and more certain now. "Well... with that in mind... I was wondering if I could have the honor of showing you the warriors den for the first time?"

I couldn't help but raise a single eyebrow, smirking as I stared back at him. "Really?" I murmured teasingly.

For a moment, Swiftflight looked completely bowled over, his eyes nearly popping out of his head as he flicked his ears and took a pawstep back. I then giggled once again as he shook his head quickly, composing himself. He then let out a purr as he flashed me a reassuring, yet mischievous look as he brushed his tail again my flank. "Yes, I just want to show you something, Cherryfall," he then purred, licking my head.

I gave my mate an eager nod, still purring as I stood up. "Okay!" I then exclaimed, kneading my paws excitedly into the ground. "Lead the way, Swiftflight!"

I continued to purr as I watched Swiftflight close his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath before leading me towards my new den. And I felt intrigued and excited as I then began to follow him, thinking about how sweet it was that he wanted to be the one to show me around. *I mean, I suppose that it's only fitting that he does, considering we're going to-*

I then cut off my own thoughts, feeling a twinge of nerves as Swiftflight then led me inside. And while I was more than thrilled to share this new den with him and many of my fellow Clanmates, I had remembered feeling very anxious moving from the nursery to

the apprentices den - having no idea what the new atmosphere would do for me - sleeping in a different place, on a different nest, surrounded by different cats...

And those thoughts had barely been able to creep into my brain when I got my first look at my surroundings that immediately blew me away. *Oh my StarClan!* I thought in amazement as flashed Swiftflight a bewildered glance. *It's amazing!*

The first difference that I noticed from the apprentices den was that it was significantly bigger. And there was something about the way that the den walls were that just seemed different - more intricate and precise. Soft moss nests scattered the floor, and even with so many cats in ThunderClan, every cat seemed to have enough space. Wow...

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Swiftflight watching me, his eyes glittering with amusement. "Well, Cherryfall, what do you think?"

I continued to scan my eyes around as I shook my head slowly. "Swiftflight, it's absolutely wonderful!" I purred before finally looking back at the tom. "I love it so much!"

Swiftflight blinked warmly back at me, letting out a chuckle. "I'm glad."

I then tilted my head to the side with concern as he then took another deep breath and padded up to meet me. "Here, let me show you around," he then meowed, nodding towards the rest of the den in front of us.

I gasped, nodding eagerly at Swiftflight once again. "Yay! Please do."

Swiftflight then flashed me an affectionate look, brushing his tail against one of my front legs as if to prompt me to follow as he then led me forward once again. "Well, I suppose there's not much *around* to *show*, however..." The tom then quickened his pace, walking deeper into the den and gesturing to some moss nests closer to the entrance and the center. "Here are where all of the

quiet cats sleep."

I tilted my head once again. "All of the quiet cats?" I asked, my voice full of laughter. "Why?"

Swiftflight then sniffed and cocked an eyebrow as he gestured to a corner with nests that were just a bit more secluded. "Because the cats that snore sleep over there."

I then let out a *mrrow* of laughter as Swiftflight then padded across the den towards the other corner, gesturing to certain nests as he went. "That's Lilypetal and Thornclaw's nest, Goldenshine and Dustystorm's nest... Snowstorm's nest, and, um..."

Swiftflight then came to a stop, and I furrowed my eyebrows with curiosity as I realized that he seemed to be standing in front of something. "...Then, of course... here's what I really wanted to show you..."

I then felt my stomach drop, and my heart practically fly away from my body as Swiftflight then stepped to the side, revealing a moss nest. "I'm sure you already had some idea, but..." He then looked down for a moment, shifting his paws back and forth again. "Well, we both agreed that we wanted to share a nest once you became a warrior, so... I've been working on it."

I could barely speak, feeling completely overwhelmed at the sight in front of me. "Oh my goodness, Swiftflight..." I whispered as I slowly padded up to it.

Swiftflight was clearly nervous by my reaction of very few words, but kept going nevertheless. "I-I hope it's okay," he stammered, looking down at the nest and gesturing to one side of it. "I added some extra moss to your side, because you've mentioned before that you like to feel like you're on a cloud when you're sleeping..."

He then sat down, flicking his tail towards some small yellow flowers that were lying across it. "A-and I know that you love the smell of buttercups, so I picked some and put them over on your side."

He then looked up towards the den roof, briefly flashing me another affectionate, amused glance. "And when your tail isn't over your face, I know that you love to look up at the stars in your nest, so I moved my nest to a place where there is a small hole in the den roof. We'll have to move it if it ever rains, but-"

Swiftflight's words were then cut off as I ran forward, fiercely pressing myself up against him and purring like I never had before. "Swiftflight, don't worry," I meowed to him, my voice practically shaking from how overcome with warmth that I was. "It's absolutely perfect."

Swiftflight, who had originally felt tense with nerves as I'd pressed up against him, then seemed to relax, wrapping his tail around me and resting his muzzle on my head. I pressed closer to him as I then murmured, "It's more than perfect."

The dark gray tom then let out a relieved sigh, nuzzling my head with his muzzle. "Good."

I continued to purr, drinking in my mate's scent as I touched my muzzle to his nose. *He's more than perfect...* I thought, as banal as that was to say - it was true. *And I won't tell him this to spare him major discomfort, but if a young Swiftpaw saw his future self doing something like this, he'd probably vomit all over ThunderClan camp... and then vomit all over his vomit.*

And I for sure kept that thought to myself as I then whispered, "I love you so much, Swiftflight. Thank you."

Swiftflight let out a loud purr, beginning to lick my cheek as he pulled me closer to him. "I love you too, Cherryfall."

Then, after a moment of us simply drinking in each other's scents, we both flinched as a voice came from the den entrance.

I quickly recognized my mother's assertive tone. "You know what I love? The fact that I also share this den with you two!"

As Poppyfrost's pawsteps then became more and more faint, I looked back at Swiftflight as he let out a quiet grunt. "Touché..." he

muttered.

Then, as I let out another giggle, I twinned my tail with Swiftflight's once again and began to lead him out of the den - of course, feeling another wave of excitement and love as I looked back at our nest one last time before emerging into the clearing.

Medicine Cat in the Den

[image]

Read on to see a certain young she-cat finally begin follow the path she was truly meant to follow...

Snowpaw's POV

I had truly never felt so nervous, anxious, yet so on top of the world at the same time from where I stood guard in the medicine den, my tail twitching behind me as I paced the area. I mean, I was in one of my favorite places in the entirety of ThunderClan territory, but I couldn't fully enjoy it with the tension that continued to rise within the camp.

I was more than happy to guard the medicine den as my mother, Lilypetal, had directed me to just before pelting through the camp entrance, but my heart had been pounding in my ears since that moment, knowing that my mother had made her departure to chase Goldenpaw - my littermate who had decided to be reckless just for fun once again.

I had actually nearly followed my mother's brown-and-white tabby fur before she had sent me away. *But surely it's pointless, anyway,* I thought as I finally forced myself to stop my aimless pacing and turn back toward the herb stock. *While I love my sister more than words can say, words also can't even begin to describe just how impulsive she is.*

I then took a deep breath, letting my fur lie completely flat as I began to glance over each pile of herbs, looking out for any outliers. *She's surely just out doing something silly that Lilypetal's going to pull her from, and that's nothing new.*

Actually managing to reassure myself a little bit, I was able to almost fully bring my focus back to the task at hand. And as I sat there in the den, all by myself, organizing the piles of leaves, I was almost tempted to pretend for a moment that I was ThunderClan's

medicine cat.

And as horrible as the thought was... I felt an overwhelming amount of hope as I realized that it might actually happen, and much sooner than I had originally expected.

I didn't know much at all, however... by the way that certain cats had acted, and by the words that I had overheard being conspired after tonight's full-moon Gathering was enough to make me question things.

I had actually already been in the medicine den for the entirety of ThunderClan's departure for the Gathering, and had still been there by the time they had returned. While I had anticipated some surprise and bitterness by Jayfeather or Leafpool... well, Jayfeather... I most certainly hadn't expected to be *thrown* through the bramble screen, *and especially not by Hollyleaf!*

With no explanation, the fluffy black she-cat had burst into the medicine den, barely giving me a moment to speak or move before tossing me out. But I had barely gotten time to recover from that daunting experience, because the conversation that Leafpool and Hollyleaf then had once I was out of there quickly took priority in my mind...

The light-brown tabby medicine cat had revealed to Hollyleaf that she had lost her position as a medicine cat.

The situation was almost too unbelievable and surreal... so much so that I wondered if StarClan had genuinely listened to my pleas that I'd been making in my mind since I'd first become a warrior apprentice. I mean, just being able to be in the medicine den and to help Jayfeather and Leafpool out while they're gone was fulfilling enough, but this made me feel as if I was walking on the lightest, fluffiest cloud.

I suppose that becoming a medicine cat apprentice had never been out of the question, but I had always been under the assumption that having three medicine cats most definitely wasn't practical. And while Leafpool stepping down didn't necessarily mean that Jayfeather needed someone to replace Leafpool immediately...

Jayfeather surely would be overwhelmed on his own...

My fur had begun to tingle as this thought crossed my mind, and my heart felt as if it were rising out of my chest, but I then quickly let out a huff and gave an irritated lash of my tail as I forced away any positive thoughts. *My first instinct is to be so excited about Leafpool - a wonderful, brilliant she-cat - losing her medicine cat position...*

I then closed my eyes, practically feeling sick with guilt. *And that is awful,* I told myself, genuinely feeling terrible for what the she-cat was surely going through. *I can't even begin to guess why she is going through it!* I wondered, managing to feel even more shocked each time that information crossed my mind. *What could she have done to lose her position?*

I then took another deep breath, narrowing my eyes as I stared intently down at my working paws. *Be patient, Snowpaw. Things will make sense soon enough.*

I then flicked my ears, dropping all of the herbs I'd been holding as I heard the bramble screen gently rustle from behind me.

I then slowly and warily began to turn around. Then, within a heartbeat, my heart seemed to burst out of my chest as my eyes fell on a larger cat-like figure standing by the den entrance - I immediately recognized the bright orange pelt of my leader, Firestar. I couldn't help but gasp in alarm, flinching as I had met his green gaze for the first time.

And that green gaze quickly washed over with surprise as I took a pawstep back. "Oh! Snowpaw, I am so sorry," the older tom meowed, blinking at me apologetically. "I didn't mean to spring on you like that."

I let out a brief sigh, almost as if to release all of the initial fear that had risen up inside of me as rapidly as a hawk swooping down to claim its prey. "T-that's okay," I murmured quietly as I looked down, suddenly feeling very small and shy as I addressed my Clan's leader.

I then felt a twinge of curiosity as Firestar didn't immediately reply

or acknowledge my words, and I looked back up to find that him looking visibly distressed, something that I didn't see from the bright orange tom often. "Are you okay, Firestar?" I asked out of genuine concern.

My words seemed to break the leader from his thoughts, causing him to shake his head quickly. "I-Yes. Yes, Snowpaw, I'm alright," he reassured me.

But the look on his face alone contradicted himself as he then went on. "I suppose tonight's Gathering just... it's left me a little disoriented."

He then shook his head once again as I simply watched him with concern. "Anyway, I was coming in here to look for Leafpool. Have you seen her?"

I shrugged as I slightly hesitated - hating that my honest answer was only going to add to the leader's clear distress. "She was in here earlier, but she left a little while ago, and I don't know where she went." Sure enough, Firestar's expression darkened with my answer, and I couldn't help but lower my head in shame. "I'm sorry..."

I then lifted my head once again as I then heard the older tom purr with amusement. "You have no reason to be sorry about that, Snowpaw," he then meowed warmly as I met his gaze again. I then tilted my head to the side as I watched him sigh, his eyelids closing for just a moment. "And anyway, I'm sure that she's nearby."

I then stared nervously back at Firestar as he then stepped deeper into the den, his gaze washing over with humor once again. "But I do have to ask, why are you in here and not her?"

I broke my gaze from the leader once again, for some reason deciding to look down at my paws for comfort as I flicked my tail toward the herb stock behind me. "Oh, well..." I began at almost a whisper. "While Jayfeather and Leafpool were at the Gathering, I thought that I would keep watch over their den and organize some of their herbs for them."

I then forced myself to look back up at Firestar for a moment,

almost immediately looking back down as I caught his tilted head and narrowed gaze. "I'm sorry-"

I cut off my own words as Firestar purred once again, to my surprise. "Again, there is no need to apologize, Snowpaw," he told me calmly, taking another step closer to me and brushing his tail against my shoulder. "I know that you're old enough to actually be able to handle yourself in here. And..."

He then let out another sigh, and his next words made my ears prick with intrigue. "Jayfeather will certainly need it - I don't think organizing the herbs is the first thing on his mind right now."

I then widened my eyes as the leader had spoken; I now knew exactly what he was implying. *And it's gotten to Firestar too? This must be quite serious!* "So, is it true?" I couldn't help but press to the leader. "Leafpool isn't a medicine cat anymore?"

I then took a pawstep back, suddenly feeling overwhelmed with apprehension as Firestar's eyes widened with alarm. "I... overheard some things once everyone began to return from the Gathering..." I then muttered warily, telling myself that I was only fibbing with that answer. The truth would only upset him, and I don't think he can afford that, as much as he wants to prove otherwise...

I looked back up at the leader once again as he sighed, his eyes closed once again. "Well, giving you the true answer will only make it all feel more real, however... yes."

The bright orange tom then winced, as if he were using all of his might to fight back emotion. "What you overheard was correct," he then whispered, his voice hoarse as he began to shake his head slowly.

I could barely stand to see the usually strong, confident and level-headed leader look so crestfallen, and I couldn't help but take a step closer to him and try to meet his gaze. "Oh my goodness..." I then sighed, trying to keep myself from asking further questions that I had absolutely no place to ask. "I really hate to hear that, Firestar."

"I hate admitting it as much as you don't like hearing it," Firestar

then muttered after a few heartbeats, straightening up and giving a shake of his fur. "And while Jayfeather is still very young, he is a full medicine cat now, and I know that he is fully capable of taking on the position himself."

He then seemed to force his chin up, his eyes dark, but also certain as he stared straight past me. "So, ThunderClan is still in perfectly safe paws."

I nodded eagerly back at the leader, wanting to reassure him just as much as he was surely trying to reassure himself. "Oh, I completely agree, Firestar!"

I then looked down again, my heart pounding in my ears, my stomach twisting, and my paws beginning to shuffle back and forth nervously as I mustered up the courage to speak my next words. "But... if he ever does need help... please know that I would be more than willing to assist."

I then screwed my eyes shut with fear for a few moments, before finally forcing them open again to look at Firestar, who was staring back at me with narrowed green eyes once again. "I see..." he murmured almost too quietly for me to hear.

Then, just as I was about ready to crumble from the unbearable amount of silence - Firestar simply looking back at me contemplatively - he finally spoke again. "I'll keep that in mind, Snowpaw. Thank you." Then, after another few moments, his gaze then softened as he gestured with his tail toward the back of the medicine den. "Do you mind grabbing me a poppy seed? I'm almost certain that I'm not going to be sleeping very well tonight."

All of my nerves suddenly disappearing, I gave an excited nod to the leader and whipped myself around. "Of course!" I exclaimed as I urgently looked through all of the stacks I had organized.

I found myself having to hold back a squeal as I did so. *Great StarClan, it's like I'm a real medicine cat!* I thought enthusiastically as I quickly picked up a poppy seed in my teeth. *And grabbing herbs for the Clan leader too, oh my goodness!*

I then turned back around, practically trotting back towards Firestar before dropping the herb at his paws. "Here you go!"

I then furrowed my eyebrows, taking a brief glance back towards the stacks and lashing my tail towards a particular one. "Would you also like some chamomile? It's not the best for sleep, but it might help your..." I then sniffed, flicking my tail to the leader as I cocked a single eyebrow. "...disorientation."

Firestar let out a *mrrow* of laughter before bending down to lick up the poppy seed. "That's alright, Snowpaw. Thank you," he meowed kindly. I then widened my eyes slightly as he then raised his head, his green gaze bright as it locked with mine. "You seem very comfortable in this den. Is this the first time you've done something like this?"

I began to shift my paws back and forth again as I answered, "Well, it's the first time I've... *let* myself stand in for them before, but I always took a peep in here when I could..."

I then couldn't help but roll my eyes. "To Goldenpaw's dismay..." I then muttered - the look on my sister's face when she'd first realized I wanted to be a medicine cat just a couple of moons ago being engrained in my mind forever. "And every time I look at herbs in the forest, I'm sure that she wants to strangle me with her tail!"

I then looked back up at Firestar to find him looking amused, and simultaneously very concerned. "She's... not too fond of me veering off the path of a warrior," I then explained. *Or rather, veering off the path away from her... which I don't like either. However...*

I then broke away from my own thoughts as Firestar let out a humored sniff. "Well, I'd know more than anyone that you can't let anyone around you give you flack for deciding to pursue a different path," he then muttered, giving me a wink. And after I let out a soft purr of amusement, he went on. "But anyway, I am impressed by how knowledgeable you are, and how willing you were to step up."

I looked down at my paws shyly, surely for the hundredth time since Firestar had entered the den. "Thank you, well..." I murmured before giving a shrug. "It really doesn't feel like any trouble at all. I

enjoy it." I really do.

Firestar then began to nod slowly, his eyes narrowing down into slits once again. "I can tell," he then murmured after another few unbearably long heartbeats.

I then flicked my ears as he continued to stare down at me, his eyes now dark as he seemed to dive into a river of his own thoughts. "You'd be a great asset to Jayfeather, especially right now," he then muttered, so quietly that I wondered if I was supposed to hear. "While he's certainly not the warmest of cats... he was likely going to take on an apprentice at some point..."

I then completely froze, one of the words that the leader had spoken causing my heart to nearly skip a beat - I practically felt dizzy, and it felt as if thousands of butterflies were flying violently around in my stomach. "A-apprentice...?" I then whispered.

I had barely been able to process the ThunderClan's leaders words by the time he continued, glancing over his shoulder as if Jayfeather were standing behind him. "It's probably a lot for him to take, especially just losing his mentor, however..." he then went on. "I feel much safer with two cats in this Clan knowing the ways of a medicine cat, and... well..."

I then nearly gasped as Firestar finally looked back at me, his green gaze now full of certainty and admiration. "Lilypetal has spoken very well of you to me, Snowpaw - she says that you are very kind, intelligent, and diligent - all things of which I have also observed," he then meowed, causing my head to feel light. "While you've also shown promise as a warrior - I think that you would do excellently as a medicine cat."

Oh my StarClan, this can't be happening...

And as incredible as these words were to hear, they also brought me an immense amount of fear and discomfort. *This is want I've wanted to hear for my entire life, but I hate that it is under these circumstances...* "Oh, well, thank you so, *so* much, but... Firestar, are you sure?" I asked worriedly, my eyes wide and my heart racing with apprehension. "I don't want to spring this on Jayfeather just as

much as you." *I would absolutely hate to upset him...*

Firestar let out a huff, his eyes reflecting as much wariness as I felt. "While I am a bit reluctant, and while I'm already certain that Jayfeather won't take to it too well, I..." He then nodded to me, his expression full of sincerity. "I just have a feeling that I'd be missing out on something very, very valuable if I put this off, and in the long run, I'm sure that Jayfeather would agree."

As I then looked down at my paws, still feeling completely blown over and bewildered, I could just barely see the ThunderClan leader trying to meet my gaze. "So, what do you say, Snowpaw?"

I held my breath as I slowly looked back at Firestar, my stomach still feeling as knotted as the most tangled bramble bush. And as troubled as I still was by the fact that I was being offered this position at such a strange, clearly very stressful time... *and the fact that Goldenpaw will surely be crushed...*

The fact that I had been dreaming about this for moons, and the fact that my own leader was offering me the position outweighed all of those troubled feelings. "Oh my goodness, Firestar, well..." I began hesitantly. "I feel so honored to be given this opportunity, and... if you really think that Jayfeather needs the extra help, then..."

I then took a deep breath, puffing out my chest just slightly. "I accept," I then meowed more clearly as the excitement finally began to set in. "I accept, I most definitely accept! Thank you, I-"

I then flicked my ears in surprise as my words were cut off - strangely, by the silence that allowed for the fast footsteps that burst into camp to seem as loud as the most violent thunderstorm.

And just heartbeats after that, I recognized Brightheart's concerned meow. "Lilypetal? What's the matter?"

I nearly gasped as I realized that it was my mother being addressed, and after Firestar and I exchanged a confused glance, I pricked an ear and attempted to listen more closely.

My stomach quickly turned upside down. *Wait... why is Lilypetal by herself? Why didn't Goldenpaw come back with her?*

My mother sounded completely out of breath, which continued to confuse and concern me. "Goodness, where do I even start?" she gasped as several pawsteps seemed to pad in her direction. "I was chasing Goldenpaw through the forest because she wanted to find Hollyleaf, and-"

Beside me, Firestar raised his tail and quickly ran out of the den. "Hold on, Lilypetal," he called out, his voice echoing through ThunderClan's camp. "Let me hear this as well."

I urgently followed Firestar out of the den, joining the crowd that was continuing to gather. One of the first cats that caught my eye was the golden-brown tabby pelt of my father, Thornclaw, standing just a little ways away.

I ran up to meet him, simply just touching my muzzle to his cheek in greeting before looking for the place that my mother was addressing the rest of the Clan. *Maybe Goldenpaw is with her... maybe she's being silent because she got in trouble?*

But to my complete dismay, I found my mother and immediately discovered that the pelt identical to my father's was not next to her. *Oh, no... no, no...*

I fearfully pressed against Thornclaw, who wrapped his tail around my back and pulled me closer to him. And even though he didn't say a word - his demeanor and expression revealed to me that he had come to the same conclusion that I had. *But please don't make it meant what we think it means...*

I forced myself to take a deep breath and simply listen as Firestar made his way up to where Lilypetal was standing. "What has happened?"

I could barely stand to looked at my mother as she began to explain, her hazel eyes full of distress. "Okay, well, I was chasing Goldenpaw out in the forest, and then..." She then took a moment to catch her breath before going on. "We both found Hollyleaf in a

cave... the cave ceiling was beginning to collapse down on top of her."

My eyes slowly widened as gasps of alarm rippled through the crowd. *Oh my goodness! Poor Hollyleaf...*

Lilypetal then gestured to the camp entrance, where Jayfeather and Lionblaze were making their way into camp. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of nerves as my gaze fell on Jayfeather's gray tabby pelt. "Jayfeather and Lionblaze were there too," my mother then went on. "We could only watch Hollyleaf begin to be buried under the rocks until..."

She then screwed her eyes shut, taking a few heartbeats before finally saying, "...Goldenpaw jumped in after her."

No! Goldenpaw, you idiot!

With those words, my whole world seemed to crumble like the rocks at the top of that cave wall, and I felt my stomach drop to the center of the earth. My mind was blank, yet it seemed to swirl with so many overwhelming thoughts at the same time. *I can't even begin to process it...* I thought as I exchanged a horrified glance with Thornclaw. I then nearly let out a whimper as I pictured Goldenpaw pelting into that collapsing tunnel.

And in that moment, I couldn't help but fear the worst, and I could only assume that my sister had died along with Hollyleaf, and all of my memories of my sister were beginning to flash before my eyes. *No... it hurts too much!*

I then forced myself to look back up at my mother as I heard her speak again. "I have no idea if they're dead or alive, or if Goldenpaw actually managed to save Hollyleaf at all..." Just as my mother's voice was growing hoarse beyond comprehension, she took a deep breath and gave a lash of her tail. "I just know that they're trapped in there, and we have no idea what to do."

I then flinched, startled as Thornclaw abruptly stepped forward, raising his voice for all of his Clanmates to hear as he ran up to meet his mate. "I'll tell you what we're going to do - we're going to

go to that cave and dig down into the ground with our bare paws if we have to!"

Lilypetal gave a sharp nod, her pained expression beginning to fill with determination. "I'm right there with you on that!"

I couldn't help but close my eyes for a moment as I sighed with relief. *Thank StarClan for my parents... that's all.*

Thornclaw exchanged a warm, yet solemn glance with his mate before nodding to Firestar. "We'll gladly lead a patrol to go and find them."

I raised my eyebrows as Firestar immediately shook his head. "That won't be necessary, Thornclaw. I'm coming as well," the ThunderClan leader declared before turning to face the rest of his Clan. "Brightheart, Cloudtail, Lionblaze and Jayfeather will come too."

Then, without hesitation, he gave a lash of his tail and began to lead the cats towards the camp entrance. "Brambleclaw, you're in charge while I'm gone!"

Wait!

I urgently ran ahead to catch up with the ThunderClan leader as I felt a rush of panic. "Firestar, wait!" I then called out loud as I pelted up to flank the orange tom. "I can't stay here in camp while I know that this is happening. What can I do to help?" If my sister really is dead, I want to be there to discover it, and if she isn't, I want to be there to help her, no doubt.

Firestar slowed his pace, flashing me a contemplative look before stepping to the side, gesturing to Thornclaw to take the lead as the patrol began to crawl through the gorse tunnel.

He then glanced past me, his eyes narrowing as he seemed to be focusing on another figure approaching the camp entrance. "Jayfeather!"

I then felt my heart skip a beat as I looked over my shoulder to see the medicine cat pause for a moment, his blind eyes flashing with

surprise before running up to meet me and Firestar. *Great StarClan, is this happening right now? During all of this?* I wondered in panic, beginning to mentally prepare myself. *There's no way that Jayfeather will take this well!*

But despite my worried thoughts, I stayed silent as I felt Firestar put the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "If it is alright with you, Snowpaw will be assisting you on this expedition," the ThunderClan leader began.

I took a brief glance at Jayfeather, who simply gave a flick of his ears as he gave a blink of alarm. I couldn't help but winch and screw my eyes shut. *Oh my StarClan, it's worse than I could have ever thought...*

"Snowpaw clearly shows a passion for healing, and she has shown interest in being your apprentice," Firestar then went on, briefly nodding to me, flashing me a look of reassurance. "After a little talk that the both of us have just had, I know that she is more than capable."

Firestar then looked intently back at Jayfeather, who still looked taken aback by his leader's words. "You most definitely can decline, however..." he then muttered, his green eyes now full of pleading. "You may need her help. But StarClan forbid..."

My heart continue to pound like it never had before as I then slowly looked back at Jayfeather, who continued to look filled with shock - clearly having taken aback by Firestar's offer. But beyond that, I could hardly read his gaze. I was bracing for him to explode, raging with annoyance that he had to have a pesky little apprentice by his side so soon, feeling so offended that Firestar thought that he wasn't capable on his own. *Even though he most definitely is... he's brilliant...*

I then completely froze as Jayfeather's deep blue gaze locked with mine, and for some odd reason, despite my fear, I found that I couldn't look away. *Absolutely brilliant...*

I had expected to look back at hostile, cold blue eyes, but I was surprised to find a glimmer of curiosity and admiration there.

And then, I was completely shocked when, after several heartbeats, he actually closed his eyes and let out a sigh. "Fine," he muttered in his usual tone, his gaze still holding mine. "I suppose now would not be a good time to retaliate, anyway."

I nearly gasped, and I had to keep my eyes from widening so far that they'd fall out of my head. And for Jayfeather's sake, I had to use all of my might to keep all of my excitement from erupting out of me. *Did Jayfeather really just accept me as his apprentice? Am I now Jayfeather's apprentice?*

I simply stood there in bewilderment as Firestar then gave a brief nod to Jayfeather before pelting out of camp, following just behind Lionblaze.

I watched the leader's bright ginger tail quickly disappear into the darkness before nervously meeting Jayfeather's blind gaze again, and for a moment, I felt just as fearful as I had when Firestar had first addressed the tom. *What if he just said yes in front of Firestar to please him?* I wondered. *It's more than likely that he's just going to send me away while he does all of the work.*

These realizations brought me to want to prevent any of that from happening. I'm leaving this camp whether Jayfeather wants me to or not! "I... I'll try not to be a bother," I tried to reassure the tom. "Just tell me what I need to do, and I'll do it, Jayfeather."

The slightly older tom continued to completely shock me as he stared back at me gently, simply giving a small sniff and blink of acknowledgement. "Thanks, Snowpaw," he muttered, his expression then washing over with distress. "But I'm praying to StarClan that we won't have to do anything at all."

He then shut his eyes for a moment, taking one last deep breath before padding quickly out of camp. "Let's go."

I stood tall, my blood seeming to rush and practically boil with so much excitement, fear, uncertainty, triumph, and determination all at the same time as I then followed my new mentor out of camp. *Let's go!*

Like Father, Like Daughter?

[image]

Read on to see how a certain black and white housecat came to take in a very young, bright-eyed new kittypet as his own...

Smudge's POV

Chapter 1

Everything around me was exactly as it always was – the sun was shining bright in the middle of the sky, the birds were chirping, the grass below me was green, and the trees that loomed ahead were as tall and strong as they had always been.

At least, for now.

While everything in my immediate earshot and sight was normal, I was still filled with lots of discomfort by the sounds that I could hear from a distance. While all I could see was the forest ahead from the top of my wooden fence, I could also very easily hear the construction that was taking place deeper into the trees – the clacking and creaking of monsters, trees being shredded and falling to the ground, and the loud voices of Twolegs shouting at each other. I still had no idea what they were doing, but I knew that it meant bad news.

Would what they were doing in that forest ever affect me? There was absolutely no way – housecats were never hurt by things like this. But at the same time, I felt a tugging panicked feeling every time it occurred to me that these Twolegs were likely doing work right where the Clans lived – where my old friend, Firestar, currently lived. I worried for him, his family... every cat in ThunderClan, even. *There have been times where I've almost considered checking on him... but I'm almost certain that the construction is going on right around where his camp is...*

I then let out a sigh, twitching my tail anxiously from my spot on the fence. *And if not, it's surely affecting them either way...*

I then began to shake my head slowly, giving a shake of my fur before leaping off of the fence and back down into my yard, those nervous thoughts consuming me within just moments. *I can't think about this stuff for too long, especially when it's all out of my control,* I told myself as I began to pad towards my cat door that led inside, deciding to grab my mid-day snack that my housefolk always laid out for me. *It certainly never does my belly any favors... but they always put it out for me... and I always eat it.*

But just as I was poking my head through the door, I felt my ears flick as I heard a voice shout from behind me.

"Heya, Smudge!"

I abruptly stopped, backing out of my cat door to see my neighbor, Henry, making his way into my yard. The plump tabby tom was struggled to squeeze his way through a small gap in my wooden fence – an easy passage through Henry's yard to my yard.

But I had to suppress a purr of amusement as I ran up to meet the tom, grabbing his scruff in an attempt to pull him through. *Well... not so easy for Henry.*

Luckily, my fellow housecat was through the gap within seconds. And just as he always did, he didn't make anything of the struggle and simply cleared his throat and shook out his fur. "Gosh, I don't think I've ever gotten up this early," he murmured groggily to me, stretching out and giving a yawn. "Are ya proud of me?"

I continued to hold back laughter, cocking an eyebrow as I licked one of my paws and ran it over an ear. "Considering you typically get up just a bit before dinner time... sure?" *Somehow you always make it sound like being fat and lazy is an achievement...*

Henry then gave a snort and a lash of his tail. "Well, with all of those ridiculous noises from the forest ripping my ears apart, I think it'll be happening more often, those darned Twolegs..."

With those words, I suddenly felt another overwhelming wave of worry for Firestar and his Clan – thinking that maybe all of these sounds we were hearing were destroying them at this very moment. *Aw, Rusty... it's times like this where I wish you had never left...*

Although Henry annoyed me in several instances, the fact that he'd brought up the construction in the forest again suddenly made me feel as if a large, buzzing fly was zipping around my face that I wanted to shoo away. "You're telling me..." I muttered almost inaudibly before quickly changing the subject. "So, how do you plan to spend your extra time?"

I watched as Henry slowly padded deeper into my yard. "What I usually do once I wake up later..." He then plopped down onto the grass, just where the afternoon sun was able to fall onto his fur. "Absolutely nothing!"

I then couldn't help but give a small roll of my eyes as the tom continued to settle down. *I suppose that I'm feeling too nice to leave Henry here by himself, and I suppose that the mid-day snack can wait...*

I then brought my gaze back to Henry, forcing down my rising annoyance as he spoke again. "So, have you heard the news?"

I couldn't help but grunt as I tilted my head to the side. "News?" I questioned. "Since when does anything around here happen that could be considered 'news'?"

"Since all of our neighbors have been driving me crazy with their chattering about it," Henry sighed as he took another big stretch. "Apparently there's a new kitten that was just adopted near us – 'as cute as a button', they're saying. Do I care, though? All kits look the same to me."

I gave the tom a small shrug, actually somewhat fascinated by that news. "Huh, I guess that is a little exciting," I commented. "Where did she come from?"

"Word's going around that she was at the shelter all by herself – no mother to speak of," Henry answered, his eyes slightly widening. "It shows; apparently she's also pretty shy. No one's heard her say a

word."

I then flicked my ears in surprise as I saw another tabby pelt suddenly appear out of the corner of my eye, and I turned to see Princess, one of my other friends and neighbors, leap up to the top of her side of the fence. "Oh my goodness, she is absolutely precious!" she then exclaimed, joining into the conversation as she flashed me a warm gaze in greeting. "She lives just a couple of houses down from us, Smudge."

I couldn't help but tilt my head at that. "Aw, really?" I murmured. "Have you gotten to meet her?"

Princess then gave a shrug before leaping down into my yard. "Well, I tried to, but *is* just a bit shy. Not rude or dismissive by any means – I'm sure that she just didn't know what to say," she began to explain before giving a purr of amusement. "I think I startled her, the poor thing. She was peeking through every nook and cranny of her yard when I called out to her."

She then sat down, wrapping her tail around her paws as me and Henry exchanged an amused glance. "But anyway, I'm sure that she'll open up once she meets some more cats and gets more comfortable with the area."

I then was nearly startled as I felt Henry's tail touch my flank from behind me, and as I flashed him an annoyed glance, he then meowed, "Smudge, why don't you go over and say hi? You seem like the type that kits would love."

I then shook out my fur, simultaneously shaking off my irritation. "Aw, please..." I breathed, for some reason suddenly feeling a bit apprehensive. "I'm no better than anyone else."

Princess seemed to see right through my humble white lie, running up to me and giving me a light nudge. "Hm... I'm not too sure about that, Smudge," she muttered teasingly, giving me a wink. "When my last litter was born, my kits were plastered to your fur whenever you came to visit – and you didn't seem too mad about it, either."

I then let out another sigh, bashfully scratching at one of my ears

with one of my back paws. "Well, I suppose that you're not wrong about that..." *And giving the kits piggy-back rides and watching them while Princess ate her meals all of the time doesn't help my case either...* I admitted to myself. *I can be great with kits when I want to be, but what if this one is a lost cause? I don't want to scare her! Plus, I was more comfortable with Princess and her kits...*

I then pulled myself out of my worried thoughts as I caught Henry exchanging a humored glance with Princess. "Ya know, cats have been saying that this kit reeks of the forest, Smudge," Henry then commented, furrowing his eyebrows. "Didn't that Rusty you were friends with go off to the forest all that time ago?"

As you would expect, this certainly took my full attention.

And I could do nothing but stare back at Henry in awe as Princess then spoke, her green eyes narrowed. "That 'Rusty' being my brother, who is now a leader of one of their Clans? Yes, I'd say that he found some success and prosperity in the forest..." she purred sarcastically.

I then watched as her eyes slowly widened, her gaze quickly shifting towards me. "Is there a chance that this kit came from one of the Clans? Goodness, would that be neat!"

I stared back at the she-cat, my head slowly nodding as so many thoughts swirled through my mind – *a cat in the Twolegplace who has possibly crossed paths with my old friend...* "It certainly would..." I murmured before shaking my head slowly, trying to think more rationally. "But what are the chances of that? Warriors don't come anywhere near here!"

"True, however..." Princess went on after a moment, lashing her tail in the direction of the forest, "we'd probably say the same about Twolegs, yet they've been out there in that forest tearing things apart!" Her green eyes then briefly flashed with worry as her tail began to lash back and forth. "It would be awful if that little kitten was snatched away from her home..."

I then looked back at Henry as he let out a huff. "You two are making something out of nothing," the big tom groaned, rolling

around so that his belly was facing the sky. "She could have been the kitten of a stray, or maybe wandered into the forest one day before she was found by Twolegs."

I then slightly narrowed my own eyes as I noticed Princess still staring back at me, her eyes now full of excitement and mischief. "Hm... well, I suppose that there's only one way to find out!" she then purred, giving me another nudge. "What do you say, Smudge? Do you want to take a peek with me?"

She then noticed my alarm and took a step back, flashing me a reassuring look. "You don't have to at all, but I know that you'll just love her!"

Just seeing the eager look in Princess's eyes for some reason made all of my nerves suddenly go away, and all of the curious, excited feelings I'd been trying to suppress finally came out as it continued to set in that this little kit that had been brought into our neighborhood just might be a little Clan cat. *It's not likely... however... what would it be like having a former Clan cat in our midst? Someone who maybe crossed paths with Firestar?* "Alright, let's do it!" I then looked over my shoulder at Henry, who was still lounging in the same spot. "Are you coming, Henry?"

Henry snorted, rolling back over onto his stomach. "That's hilarious," he meowed sarcastically. "I'll just live vivaciously through you two."

I also let out a snort at that comment. *You don't do anything vivaciously...*

"Anyway, if you're going to find out if this little two-month-old kitten is a forest cat, then you're probably just wasting your time," Henry then went on. "It's not like she's going to tell you her life story or anything – if she even remembers it."

"Oh, please!" Princess then exclaimed after a sigh. She then gave me yet another light nudge. "We know how to detect a warrior by now, don't we, Smudge?"

The determination inside of me continued to rise as I exchanged a

thrilled glance with the tabby she-cat. "We sure as heck do! We know a pretty darn special one," I meowed enthusiastically. "I'll take my chances!"

Beside us, Henry then took one last stretch before very, very slowly getting back up on his paws. "Well, good luck," the tom breathed as his mouth opened up into a yawn.

He then began to make his way back towards the crack in my fence. "I'm sure that you'll catch her sharpening those little claws on old bones – that's the clincher right there!"

Oh, come on! I scoffed to myself, watching as Henry struggled for several moments before finally being able to fit his way through the fence, reflecting on all of the tales he had told me and Firestar all those moons ago about the Clan cats – all of which had been proven wrong since then. *And even if sharpening his claws on bones is something that Firestar does, at least he still has the courtesy after all this time to not tell me about it...*

Princess clearly was thinking the same way I was, purring with amusement as she leapt back up onto her fence. "Oh, of course; I'm scared already!" she called back to Henry. She then looked down at me, lashing her tail as if to beckon me up. "Follow me, Smudge!"

Oh gosh... here we go! I thought excitedly as I jumped up onto the fence behind Princess. But as we began to carefully walk ahead, I couldn't help but let out a quiet amused snort. *Gee, why am I so excited about this? It's as if I'm about to discover another little Rusty or something...*

I then let out a huff as Princess quickened her pace in front of me. *It's just a shy little kit you're welcoming into the neighborhood, Smudge. So, just absorb Princess's excitement and then be done with it!*

Chapter 2

Although I had just tried to talk myself out of my excitement just moments ago, I still felt a buzz of anticipation as Princess led me past each house next to us. While Henry had probably been speaking rationally about the little kitten having nothing to do with

the forest, or just being too young to be able to recall it, if so, I couldn't help but feel excited at the thought that this kit possibly came from the forest. *And I'd know someone else that has potentially experienced the Clans!*

I then let out a snort. *While I've already experienced a lot of the Clans, with Firestar still coming to see me every once in a while, Princess giving one of her kits to them, and me receiving dreams from StarClan that told Firestar to find a lost Clan is a lot for me to handle, however...*

I then felt my stomach practically hollow out with excitement and apprehension as I noticed Princess begin to slow down after the next house we passed, flashing me an eager glance from over her shoulder. As I then slowed down myself, I watched as Princess suddenly seemed to be making her movements more slow and intentional, as if to keep quiet.

We had arrived, I was sure of it.

Princess then completely came to a stop, looking back at me as she began to very steadily lower down her belly and haunches. She then beckoned to me once again with her tail, her eyes slightly warning as if to remind me to be quiet.

So, I very, very carefully creeped up so that I was next to her up on top of the fence, and I felt her fur brush against mine as I finally peered over into the yard with her. *Moment of truth...*

I flicked my ears in surprise, not having to look for very long at all; my eyes had immediately fallen onto what I assumed to be the very kitten that we had come to see – a brown tabby-and-white little she-kit. *Well, I'll be...*

I honestly had to hide an intrigued and amused purr as I began to watch her. She very clearly exploring this backyard that was likely still very new to her – she seemed so comfortable with the environment, yet it was clear that nothing here was familiar to her. Her little pink nose was up in the air with her little paws trotting around the area, just as Princess had said that she usually did.

I very steadily leaned over and pressed my muzzle to Princess's ear.

"She doesn't want to leave one stone unturned, does she?"

Princess then let out a quiet sniff as she looked back at me. "Well, there'd be no way to find adventure if she just sat around!"

Adventure... I repeated to myself as I looked away from Princess, and back down into the yard. *She's barely been here and she already seems to want adventure... those Clans cats can never seem to sit still...*

For most of the time that Princess and I had been watching the kitten so far, her brown tabby back had been facing us, so I couldn't help but raise my eyebrows in curiosity when the little scrap finally turned around in a way that I could see her face. I couldn't help but feel the smallest twinge of warmth as I got a look at her. *All kits may look the same to Henry, but the other cats in the neighborhood weren't wrong!* I thought to myself. *She really is as cute as a button!*

And not to mention, her eyes were one of the strangest things that I had ever seen – a captivating brown-green color that practically glowed in the sunlight. "Wow..." I couldn't help but whisper to Princess. "Even if this kit doesn't come from the forest, her eyes sure look like you're staring into the reflection of it."

"They're gorgeous, aren't they?" Princess whispered back to me, keeping her gaze on the kit below. "I've never seen anything like it."

Then, from there, the two of us kept completely silent, not wanting to alarm the kit as she continued her journey around her yard. I was trying incredibly hard to hold back my purrs as I watched her sniff around, hop on and off of rocks, and even stare intently at the little bugs that waddled around in the grass. *While many kits have a sort-of curious nature, there's something about this kit's instincts that seems just a bit different...* I thought as I continued to watch her. *She's fascinated, but wary about everything, and is prepared for anything to possibly be a threat... certainly not how I behave.*

I then nearly flinched when, after several moments, Princess leaned closer to me again, as if she could almost hear my swarming thoughts. "So, what's the consensus, Smudge?" she then meowed softly to me. "Is she a vicious warrior like Firestar?"

Before I could even answer my friend, or even think of an answer to begin with, a call sounded from a few houses away – the way Princess and I had come – that I was certain was a Twoleg.

And I looked back at Princess to see her flicking her ears and letting out a small, annoyed hiss. "Aw, shoot!" she then whispered, beginning to back away as she looked up at the sky that was slowly beginning to turn orange with the lowering sun. "I *completely* forgot that my housefolk are taking me to get groomed tonight!"

I let out a quiet, amused snort as I poked the she-cat's shoulder with my tail. "Good gosh, it's about time!" I quietly exclaimed, giving her a wink. "No wonder the kit didn't want to talk to you before!"

I had to hold back laughter once again at Princess's reaction to my teasing as she gasped, poking me back harder with her own tail. "Please – I'd still smell better than you after not grooming for an entire year!"

I then couldn't help but let out a quiet purr at that comment, and I then closed my eyes for a moment as Princess then gave me a quick lick on the cheek and then began to pad back along the fence to her house. Just by the regretful look in her eyes, I could tell that she hated that she had to leave in the middle of our observation. "I'll see you later, Smudge! Tell me if you make any more discoveries!"

I gave the tabby she-cat a nod, as well as a reassuring lash of my tail. "Will do, Princess!" I won't let you down.

I continued to look over my shoulder back at the she-cat, watching her go and flashing her an affectionate look before creeping up just a few more pawsteps. I had to admit, I was a bit bummed that I couldn't joke around or exchange theories with Princess anymore, but my curiosity quickly made me forget her absence as I continued to watch the little creepy-eyed kit.

As she slid through the bright-green, freshly-cut grass – now seemingly pretending to hunt beetles and every once in a while gaping her mouth in the air as if to catch scents – I continued to be amazed by how familiar the movements looked. *From the way that I've seen Firestar act since he's joined the Clans... it definitely looks*

familiar.

I then let out a quiet huff as I looked over my shoulder towards the forest. *But I could be overthinking all of it. Cats have instincts, right? I've been told that even the laziest, dumbest housecats would know what to do in the wild if needed. But I still can't help but wonder... has she at least observed a forest cat before this?*

I had been so caught up in my thoughts, that I nearly fell over the fence in surprise and alarm when I looked back towards the kit's yard to meet the little kit's vibrant brown-green gaze – also reflecting all of the surprise and alarm that I felt.

Shoot! I thought angrily to myself. *She's going to think that I'm the biggest creep!*

Urgently wanting to get out of sight as soon as possible, I somehow found my footing up on the fence, not even caring how loud or quiet I was as I then began to back away, trying to flash the kit an apologetic, kind glance.

But before I could back away completely out of sight, I was surprised to see that the kit's fear had quickly washed over with intrigue, as if she had quickly established that I wasn't a threat. *Because I'm most definitely not...*

Well, she had instinctively backed away, but her glowing eyes were kind, and she had actually given me a small nod as she walked more deeply into her yard. And she continues to surprise me... I thought, straightening up and watching as the kit's brown tail disappeared into a bush. Gosh, can I not wait to tell Princess about all of this!

I then continued to back away, not wanting the kit to think that I was still watching her as she simply tried to enjoy exploring her yard.

However, I couldn't bring myself to fully leave yet when the little kit suddenly emerged from the bush she had disappeared into, slowly making her way towards her side of the fence that faced towards the forest.

I raised my eyebrows and kept completely still once again as I then watched her glance her little head up at it.

I actually felt my stomach twist up into a knot as her strange eyes then seemed to glitter even more in the sunlight – it was like she was staring at a freshly-filled bowl of food. At least, that's definitely the face I make when I discover that...

In this situation, however, I didn't think that was a good sign. *What are you up to, little one?*

I then felt my heart drop as she then crouched down, then proceeding to jump up, cling to the fence about halfway up, before climbing to the top of the fence.

And to my complete dismay, it looked as if she were about to leap again, but not back into her yard.

Golly gosh, what the heck does she think she's doing?

I was immediately overcome with fear, and I instinctively stood up once again – not caring one bit about "hiding" anymore. *And I most definitely don't care about scaring her again!*

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, what the heck do you think you're doing?" I shouted to the kit, grabbing her little body in my jaws and placing her on a more stable part of the fence. After I did so, she simply stared up at me in alarm, so I went on. "Were you about to leap over the other side of the fence?"

I then simply watched, the adrenaline and panic still rushing through my blood as the little kit slowly began to back away, her eyes so wide that I thought that they would fall right off of her head. "I-I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" she eventually squeaked, my eyebrows raising at hearing her speak for the first time. "I-I was just going to take a peek..."

"That doesn't matter!" I retaliated, my anger and surprise still driving my words. "A kit as little as you are does not need to be going anywhere *near* the forest, *especially* right now!"

I then was shocked to see the kit's ears flick, and her eyes widen

even more, but this time, not from fear - but curiosity. "W-what's going on in the forest?" she asked, the answer to her question seeming to be the only thing that mattered anymore.

I managed to feel a small twinge of amusement at this reaction, causing my anger to slowly diminish as I answered her. "A bunch of gosh-darn Twolegs are going through and chopping down trees, digging holes, and basically destroying everything in their sight," I explained to the little kit, feeling a small chill running down my spine. *And explaining it to you only makes it feel more real...*

And to my surprise, the little kit seemed just as dismayed as I felt, her eyes still wide as she turned to look out into the trees ahead. "That's awful..." she then whispered, almost too quietly for me to hear. She then looked back up at me. "But... why?"

I gave her a shrug as I began to shake my head slowly. "I couldn't tell you, and I'm glad that I don't know," I answered her, beginning to pace back and forth along the fence. "If I had to guess, they'd either hurt you with one of those massive machines that they have, or one of the Twolegs will take you away!"

I then paused in my pacing, about to say something else to the tabby-and-white kit as I looked over my shoulder, but I quickly cut myself off as I quickly met two large narrowed eyes, staring back at the forest once again with her gaze suddenly very dark. *What in the name of...* I thought, slowly and hesitantly turning back around to face her. *If she is from the forest, is she remembering it for the first time? Is she actually remembering a time that she was in a Clan...?*

"Wow... that does sound scary, I suppose," the kit murmured before I could even let my thoughts spiral out of control any more. I then completely brought my attention back to her when she actually took a step closer to me, her head tilted to the side and her eyes inquiring. "But is it okay if I just watch from the top of this fence?"

I then couldn't help but feel a wave of affection and a purr begin to rumble in my throat as I realized that this little kit, for some reason, had established myself as an authority figure to her. *Well... I guess that yelling in her face about her potentially leaping over the fence might do the trick...* "That is more than okay," I meowed warmly to her. "I

do it all of the time!"

I then nearly let out a *mrrow* of laughter as she then immediately set her haunches down on the top of the fence, seeming perfectly satisfied with that situation.

When I then settled down next to her, she didn't object. "So, you were hoping that you could get a glimpse of the forest, huh?"

The kit then began to shift her paws back and forth as I anxiously awaited her answer. "Most definitely," she answered honestly, her eyes almost beginning to shine as she continued to stare out into the forest. "The trees are so pretty , the grass looks so soft, and there's so much freedom!"

I then narrowed my eyes, giving her a gentle nudge. "That yard of yours doesn't do the trick?"

"It's beautiful, but... I just wanted to know what else was out there, I suppose."

I tensed up, now staring forward but flashing glances at the kit every few moments.

But I could feel her curious gaze burning into me once again. "Are Twolegs always out in the forest with their big machines?"

I let out a long sigh, looking down at the kit once again. "As a matter of fact, not at all," I replied. *And even if you aren't from the forest, I am still more than happy to tell you about it*, I realized to myself, intrigued by this little bright-eyed, curious little kit whether or not she had been born as a Clan cat or not. "Did you know that cats actually live out in the forest?"

The little kit's eyes widened once again. "They do?"

I gave a slow, hesitant nod, not sure if I was satisfied with her surprise. "Yes, they do."

"All of the time?"

"Indeed, they do."

"Wow, that's neat!" the kit then exclaimed before proceeding to tilt her head, her ears giving a flick. "How do you know about them?"

I looked out to the forest yet again, feeling a mix of heartache and pride as Firestar crossed my mind once again. "Well, I'd only heard rumors for a while, but then one of my friends went to go join them – it was one of the stupidest, bravest things that I had ever seen," I nearly whispered, my voice growing thick with emotion.

But when the kit stared up at me in awe, a certain glimmer in her eye, I couldn't help but clear my throat and meet her with a hard stare. "But you're much too young to ever consider doing something like that."

The kit then lowered her head, and I almost could sense her disappointment. "Oh... I wasn't..." she murmured quietly.

Aw, well, shoot...

Before I could give her any sort of words to comfort her, she shook her head quickly and looked back up at me. "What do the wild cats do?"

I furrowed my eyebrows, genuinely having to think for a moment about what Firestar had told me so far. "I believe that they all live together in big groups..." I began. "They hunt for their own food, and they fight over territory." *Geez... it's definitely never a life that I would enjoy living... but I've never seen Rusty... or Firestar, happier.*

"Wow..." the kit breathed after a few moments, pulling me out of my thoughts. I then looked back down at her to find her shaking her head slowly in amazement. "I bet they're awesome."

Hm...

I then cocked a single eyebrow, trying not to get excited the more that the kit spoke. *While she hasn't shown any direct indication that she's from the forest, I can't help but think... are me and Princess being proven right? She reminds me so much of Firestar at that same age.* "So, what's your name, little one?"

The kit looked brightly up at me, her strange eyes warm as she

enthusiastically answered me. "My name is Lily!" she exclaimed. "What's yours?"

I gave Lily a small nod, as well as a soft nudge on her shoulder with my tail. "I'm Smudge. I live just a few houses down from you," I answered her kindly before flashing her a sheepish, apologetic glance. "Sorry if I startled you a bit earlier – all of my friends are excited about your arrival, so I wanted to see what all of the buzz was about!"

Lily then gave a small purr of amusement, her gaze shy, but kind. "That's okay," she meowed. "I'm sorry for startling you, too. I'll just watch the forest from the fence, I promise!"

I then widened my eyes and gave a flick of my ears, hating to make little Lily think that she had to be so restricted. "Hey, I mean, you're more than welcome to explore the area," I reassured her quickly before giving a wink. "The forest might be just a little too much for you right now, Lily."

I then stood up, nodding towards the houses that stood behind me. "If you wanted to, I could take you around the Twolegplace – introduce you to some of my friends, and we could do some exploring?"

I then nearly stepped back as Lily gasped, her little paws beginning to knead into the ground. "Oh my goodness, that would be wonderful!" she nearly squealed in reply. "Right now?"

I snorted, briefly pointing my nose up to the sky, where the sun continued to fall closer and closer to the ground. "Well, we should do it before it's time for you to eat dinner!"

I then bent down, gently grabbing Lily in my jaws and then plopping her down in front of me on the fence. "I'm right behind you. I'll tell you where to go next."

Then, as Lily let out another little squeal and proceeded forward, I couldn't help but shake my head slowly in amazement as I watched her go. *Wherever she came from, she's certainly not like many kits I've seen before...* I thought. *Maybe she was born just like any other*

housecat, but it wouldn't surprise me at all if that's warrior blood running through those veins.

I then let out a sigh, running up to her and making sure that she was keeping her balance on the fence. *Wherever she's from, she's got a heck of a blazing little spirit, just like Rusty did all those moons ago, and I can't help but feed it.*

Unlikely Friends

[image]

Read on to see a little Lily encounter a very peculiar new friend...

Lily's POV

Chapter 1

I could already feel the warm rays of the sun falling onto my fur, sensing the brightness of a new morning before I even opened my eyes. I then felt my mouth open into a large yawn as I took a stretch in my large, cushy cat bed.

I then finally opened my eyes, the light from the window in front of me blinding me for just a moment before I was able to look beyond the glass, where I was able to see the house across from mine, and the bright morning sun rising just above it. *Good morning to me!* I exclaimed to myself, so thankful for the window I had just in front of my bed that stretched almost all the way down to the floor. *There's nothing like being able to wake up and see the beautiful daylight in front of you!*

It was always what woke me up, and I could never get enough of it. *It's almost like getting to wake up outside, except I'm comfortable!*

With another yawn, I then took a leap out of my bed, immediately making my way towards the kitchen where my food was already waiting for me. I stopped in front of my food bowl, holding my breath as I took the first bite of my cat food.

I couldn't help but let out a slight quiver as I swallowed. *Mediocre, as usual.*

Once I'd finished my meal, I bolted to the tall glass door in the next room over, quickly feeling my fur tingle with excitement as my gaze met the view of my large backyard.

I then tilted my head to the side, letting out a grunt as I narrowed my eyes. *And... myself?*

I backed up just a few pawsteps, realizing that I could just barely see my own reflection through the glass.

I flicked my ears in surprise, the last time I had looked at myself being a couple of months ago in a rain puddle. *Goodness, I've definitely grown just a bit! I'm just a bit smaller than the fully grown she-cats. Well, I'll be darned...*

I also was getting an opportunity to get a look at the collar that my housefolk had gotten for me just a few days ago. Looking at it now, I was immediately able to recognize the bright pink that was wrapped around my neck, and the little bell that hung down from it. *Huh... so that's what that jingling noise was.*

I then let out a satisfied grunt before shaking out my fur and finally pelting through my little cat door and out into the bright sun, soft green grass, and the refreshing outside air. *There's nothing like it, and I manage to get more excited about it every single day!*

To be honest, I was actually somewhat- no, *very* happy that I'd missed my housefolk this morning, and that they were likely still sleeping. I liked them just fine, but if I ran into them before my morning outside time, they typically grabbed me away from what I was doing and cuddled me for what felt like *half* the day, hence, delaying my outside time. *Don't get me wrong, I love my cuddling, however...* I thought to myself as I took a moment to lie down in the grass. *I'd give up cuddling forever if it meant I got to make up for all of that lost time out here!*

I then got back up onto my paws, made dirt behind some holly bushes, and then proceeded to go deeper into my yard, thanking some higher power that my housefolk also hadn't had the chance to cut the grass yet. *I don't know why they think that short grass is beneficial in any way,* I thought, slowing down my pace as I quietly lowered down into a crouch, feeling the grass brush against my flank. *This makes it so much easier to hunt!*

Or pretend to, rather.

My eyes were set on a small green beetle that was crawling up a blade of grass just a couple of tail-lengths away. I held my breath, narrowing my eyes as if to bring nothing but the beetle into the frame of my gaze.

I then slowly began to creep towards the bug, hoping with everything that it wouldn't fly away with my movement. *Get ready to be startled like you never have before, little guy...*

I was just moments before leaping at it before abruptly stopping, noticing movement from the fence out of the corner of my eye.

And when I realized what it was, I let out a squeal and nearly popped back up onto my paws, completely disregarding the little green beetle and bolting towards the fence to meet the cat standing at its top. "Smudge!" I exclaimed from the bottom of the wooden structure, meeting the friendly gaze of the black and white tom. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, Lils!" Smudge called down, lashing his tail to me in greeting. He then let out a sniff, his eyes washing over with sympathy. "Sorry to distract you from that bug! You almost got it this time."

I shrugged, taking a quick glance over my shoulder at where I'd last saw it. "Oh, that's okay," I reassured the older tom, my tail beginning to twitch as I felt a rush of excitement. "I'll definitely get it next time!"

Smudge's eyes then seemed to glow with warmth. "I know you will," he purred. I then raised my eyebrows as the tom crouched down, looking as if he was about to leap into the yard. "So-"

But I raised my tail, running all the way up to the fence. "Wait! Hold on," I urged just before unsheathing my claws and beginning to climb up the fence myself. "I'll come to you!"

I lodged my claws deep into the wood, using my forelegs and hindlegs to throw myself upwards, gripping back onto the fence each time. *Just like climbing a tree... just like climbing a tree...*

Then, just when I was about a tail-length from the top, I felt teeth meet my scruff as Smudge seemed to be helping me with the last bit. He slowly but surely lifted me up from the fence, then placed me right in front of him on the very top. "You're getting so fast at that, Lily, my gosh," he commented as began to brush some wood debris from the top of my head with his tail. "You're practically a blur."

I felt a wave of pride as I then gave a shake of my fur. "Aw, thanks! I suppose I've been practicing a little," I purred. I then gave a flick of my ears, tilting my head. "Well... I mean, it kind of came naturally." I still wondered why it had been so easy for me to get the technique – it'd only taken me a few days of practice in order to get up to the top without a slip-up.

Smudge simply shook his head back at me, his yellow eyes full of amazement. "Well, I'll be darned."

I then nodded eagerly back at the tom. "Yeah!"

I then nearly let out a gasp, my eyes widening as I put my tail over my mouth. "Sorry!" I then nearly squealed, my previous words processing as horror began to overcome me. "Oh my goodness, I hope that didn't sound like bragging." *Gosh-darn you, Lily!*

Smudge then let out a purr of amusement as he lightly nudged my shoulder with his tail. "Lily, please!" he then meowed kindly, causing my guilt to slowly diminish. "I don't think you could sound like you were bragging even if you said, 'I am better than all of you'."

I then looked down, still wanting to rip my own head off at the comment I'd made, despite Smudge's reassurance. "Well... I would hope I would never say that..." I murmured shyly.

But I then couldn't help but purr as Smudge then roughly nuzzled my head with his tail. "Exactly."

I then felt a strong wave of affection, continuing to purr as I then nuzzled my head into Smudge's shoulder, so happy to be in the tom's company. He'd always been so warm and friendly, and he

honestly was one of the first memories that I had as a little kit. He'd been such a mentor and a guide to me as I got comfortable at my new home. And since the day he'd first introduced himself to me, coming from his own home just a few houses down, he'd come around almost every day, and we'd play and explore. And now, and we'd been spending time together and going on little adventures for as long as I could remember. Even as I was growing and getting older, the fun seemed to never stop.

He'd been such a mentor and a guide to me as I got comfortable at my new home. He was so kind, warm, and even was protective of me in many ways. *Other kits around here had a mother and a father to guide them,* but I don't, I thought to myself, giving the black and white tom a warm look as I pulled away from his shoulder. *But... I have Smudge, and that's almost cooler.*

Smudge then returned the look, flicking my ear with his tail before beginning to walk along the fence. "Come on."

I flicked my ears, letting out an excited gasp. "Oh! What are we doing today?"

To my surprise, Smudge didn't reply immediately, simply walking a few more pawsteps and then slowly coming to a stop, looking over his shoulder back at me.

I stopped as well, my tail lashing back and forth eagerly. "What?" I prompted, watching as Smudge continued to hesitate.

And I could barely stand the wait anymore once he finally spoke again, his head shaking as he gave a shrug. "You know, Lily, I've been thinking..." he then paused again, letting out a sigh. "Well, we have a lot of fun wandering around the neighborhood together-"

I gave a sharp nod, taking a step closer to the tom. "Of course we do!" I felt I had to insist.

Smudge then gave another shrug, and for some reason, he seemed to take a glance away from the Twolegplace, more towards the forest that stretched just beyond the fence we were standing on. "Yes, but... you're getting older, and I feel like it finally might be

time to..."

I then noticed his yellow eyes briefly seem to flash with worry before he closed them. "I'm willing to take you a little farther away from the neighborhood, and..."

He then opened his eyes, meeting my gaze with more certainty. "...and closer to the forest."

Holy mice on a mountain of mums.

I practically felt my stomach flip upside down, and my eyes widened so much that I thought they would fall out of my head. Because, to be honest, I could not believe what I was hearing. Up until this point, at my urging, Smudge had greatly hesitated to let me do something as much as *look* at the forest – he always made the claim that it was too dangerous. *Which I have no doubt, but still...*
"No way..." I then breathed. "Smudge, are you kidding?"

Smudge slowly shook his head, giving yet another shrug. "And risk my heart breaking at seeing the disappointment on your face if I was? No..." he replied. He then seemed to take a moment, closing his eyes and letting out another sigh. "No, I'm not joking, Lily. I know that you've wanted to get a closer look for a while, and..."

His gaze then hardened, though it was warm as he put the tip of his tail on my shoulder. "I think that you're old enough for me to trust that you won't go looking for trouble."

No way!

I then couldn't hold in my excitement anymore, letting out a squeal and pressing myself against Smudge once again. My head felt so light that everything around me seemed to be a blur, still hardly being able to believe that Smudge was letting me take a glance at the forest, something that I'd only been able to look at from a distance from the top of the fence all of my life. "Oh my goodness, thank you, Smudge! I cannot wait!"

I then pulled away from the tom, flashing him a teasing look. "Are you sure that you're comfortable?"

I then felt my stomach seemingly split in two when Smudge let out a snort, then leaping down from the fence – not the side that went back into my yard, rather, the side that led straight to the forest beyond. "No, I'm not," he muttered, though his eyes glowed with amusement. He then hardened his gaze again as he watched me leap down as well. "However, we shouldn't run into any issues if we're careful. Right?"

I straightened my posture, giving the older tom a sharp nod. "Exactly!" I reassured Smudge.

I then gave another smaller nod, lashing my own tail towards the forest. "If it makes you feel better, you can lead the way!" With that, Smudge flashed me a grateful and relieved look, and I quickly followed as he began to lead me ahead. "And if you suddenly come to a stop, screech, and then run away like a little mouse, I'll know that we've run into something scary, and I'll fight it off."

Just in front of me, Smudge looked over his shoulder and flashed me an affectionate look. "You are hilarious, thank you for that."

I then let out a *mrrow* of laughter. "Always!" I purred before finally letting myself look around as we got closer and closer to the towering trees ahead. While the houses of the Twolegplace were still slightly in sight at this point, I could still say for sure that this felt like unfamiliar territory.

And holy *heck*, was I about to squeal and scare away every piece of prey in that forest!

But I maintained self-control, simply trying to take in everything around me as the shadows of the trees began to fall on my and Smudge's fur. "Wow, this is like a real forest now!" I exclaimed.

I then quickened my pace so that I was nearly flanking Smudge, my fur beginning to tingle as a certain question crossed my mind, one that made me simultaneously terrified, and on-top-of-the-world ecstatic. "Are we getting any closer to where those wild cats live, Smudge?"

I then felt a wave of worry as Smudge slowed his pace, and when

he turned his head to face me, I met his solemn gaze. "Well... typically... but..." he began. He then seemed to glance both ways one time, almost as if he was attempting to "find" them with those two glances, before looking down at his paws. "I... I wonder if they're even around here anymore."

I then pricked my ears, my heart seeming to grow physically heavier with sadness as I recalled something that Smudge had mentioned to me at least a couple of times in the past. And suddenly, the rumbling sounds of Twoleg monsters and voices made their way through my ears – something that, through the excitement of coming into the forest, I hadn't paid any attention to.

But now that I was, I continued to be filled with worry and sadness. *What... what if this is my one and only opportunity to see this forest?* I thought, taking a glance up at the gorgeous sunlight leaking through the trees above. *Is that why Smudge finally decided to bring me here?*

I then met Smudge's gaze once again. "You... you think that they've left?" I asked worriedly, feeling an overwhelming amount of sympathy for the cats that may have lived here all of their lives, *let alone one day!*

I then had to close my eyes for a moment as I recalled something else that Smudge had told me. "You had a friend that was a part of those wild cats, right?"

With that, my heart seemed to sink even lower when Smudge didn't even say a word in reply, simply looking back at me worriedly as he gave a nod.

I could barely stand to see my friend look that way, and I suddenly felt like I needed to brighten the mood. So, I gave him a light, comforting nudge with my shoulder. "Well, surely they've just found somewhere better to live!" I exclaimed.

I then let out a lighthearted sigh, beginning to look around the forest once again, my heart beginning to rise up from its slow and fly up into the sky as I tried to process every bush, every tree, every flower... heck, every blade of grass. *It's all more beautiful and perfect*

than I could have ever imagined or dreamed... because it's not like I dream of it almost every day. Gosh, how I wish that I could be here every day... live like one of those wild cats and sneak through those bushes, climb those trees, pick those flowers, hunt in that grass...just like those wild cats maybe did.

I then flashed Smudge an appreciative look, still so thankful that he had decided to bring me out here. Even if it was just for one day, it felt like more than enough. "So, do you know much about the forest?" I then asked him eagerly, further pushing to change the subject. "What kind of creatures live here? What plants there are?"

To my relief, Smudge let out a purr, meeting my gaze warmly. "Honestly, probably no more than you do," he replied, laughter in his voice. "And I'm fine with that!"

I purred with him, giving him another light nudge. "That's okay!" I reassured the tom.

I then briefly leaned my head on Smudge's shoulder. "Either way, I really appreciate you bringing me here," I meowed, then pulling away to meet his gaze. "Seriously, thank you so much, Smudge. I could not be more thankful."

For some reason, Smudge's yellow eyes briefly seemed to flash with sadness before he leaned down to touch his nose to my head. "Of course, Lils," he then meowed.

I then flicked my ears with alarm as Smudge suddenly scoffed, pulling away from me and rolling his eyes. "Aw, gosh-darn it!"

I tilted my head to the side and watched as Smudge then began to pace the area anxiously. "What? I asked worriedly. "What's wrong?"

Smudge then paused, sitting down and letting out a frustrated sigh. "My housefolk are taking me to get groomed later today, and I completely forgot."

I then raised my eyebrows, continuing to be surprised as Smudge quickly stood up again, seeming to head back towards the Twolegplace. "Well, I'm sorry, Lily – I guess I brought you out here

for nothing!"

Oh, dear! No!

Although it was clear that Smudge was expecting me to follow him, I found that I couldn't move. "Does... does it have to be for nothing?"

Smudge slowly came to a stop, and then even more slowly turned back around to face me, his yellow eyes narrowed. "Lily..."

I ran up to meet the tom, hope that I could stay in the forest for just a bit longer rushing through my body. *While one day will suffice, I just... I just need a little more time!* "Smudge, I promise, I will not go any farther than where you've let me, and I'll just explore the area!" I tried to meow as confidentially as I could.

I then sat down in front of him, raising an eyebrow as I tilted my head to the side. "You said yourself that I was old enough to be here and not go looking for trouble!"

Smudge sat down as well, closing his yellow eyes. "...despite being under supervision."

I let out a small purr of amusement before continuing to push on. "Listen, I know that the forest is dangerous just as much as you do, but..." I then let out a sigh, standing up and looking up at the trees above once again as a slight breeze rustled my fur, causing my heart to practically flutter. "I really, really want to look at it for a bit longer..."

I then looked down towards the bushes, flowers, and the grass once again, and the sight of them made me more certain that I was nowhere near ready to leave yet. "It's... so gorgeous, and I get to hear and smell things that I don't get to back at the house." *And experience so much beyond that...*

Feeling yet another rush of desire, I took another step closer to Smudge, hardening my gaze. "I absolutely promise that I will stay close to the neighborhood, and I won't go looking for trouble."

I then watched Smudge hesitate for a few moments. *That's not a*

no... "...Please?"

I then kept my mouth shut, aware that I probably sounded like a pitiful kit as I then watched Smudge continue to find his words, looking around the forest with yellow, pensive eyes.

And eventually, his eyes fell back on me, and then he gave a sigh and closed his eyes yet again. "Alright, Lily," he then breathed after a few heartbeats. "You can stay here for just a little while, however..."

He then flicked his ears, seeming to remember that he was in a hurry as he stood up and continued his travel back to the Twolegplace, calling back his next words. "On my way back, I *will* be telling Princess that you are nearby. If she doesn't see you by sunset, she will come and find me, and then I will come and find you and slap you with my tail!"

Despite my excitement fogging up all of my senses, I tried my best to process all of Smudge's words and give him a nod. "That all sounds fair to me!" I called out to Smudge, flashing him one last grateful look. "Bye, Smudge! I'll see you soon!"

Smudge returned the look, waving his tail back at me before disappearing through the trees. And as I watched him go, I could pretty much sense the nerves raging from his pelt, even as he disappeared from sight.

And to be honest, now that Smudge was gone, I found that I was a bit nervous too.

I mean, this was the first time I had ever explored unfamiliar *wild* territory all by myself, and my desire to see and be in the forest had blinded me to that for a moment. As I'd told Smudge, I was most certainly aware of the dangers that the forest brought, as amazing as it was.

And even thought a part of me wanted to pelt as deep into the forest as I wanted to, I knew that I had to be practical, and *safe*. *Okay, Lily*... I told myself, taking a deep breath as I began to leisurely walk beneath the trees. *Explore all that you want to, but the*

Twolegplace must be somewhat in sight, and it has to be at a point where if I were in danger and called out – Princess, or some *cat, would be able to hear me.*

I already felt a bit more at ease with these restrictions I was giving myself, and now, I was fully able to enjoy what was around me as I began to wander the area. *Dear goodness...*

All over again, I was basically entranced by everything that overtook my senses – the sounds of bugs and birds twirping, and creatures stirring in the bushes, and the trees and bushes rustling with the wind, and the strange, *very* strange scents that flooded through my nostrils.

And as I stood there in the sunlight, my paws in the grass, and the wind slightly blowing my fur, I suddenly wasn't sure if I'd ever felt so comfortable. *Why would Twolegs ever want to tear all of this down?* I then thought to myself, feeling another wave of sadness as I tried to block out the sounds of construction that I could still barely hear. *It's horrible to think that soon none of this may be here...*

I then let out a sigh, turning to face the part of the forest that I hadn't walked through yet, where everything seemed denser, and where the trees were closer together. I wanted to more than anything to go there, and explore every piece of the forest while I still could.

But more than that, I didn't want to disappoint Smudge.

So, as they day continued on, and the sun cruised across the sky, I continued to follow my rule, only exploring parts of the forest that Smudge and I had passed, and making sure that I could see even the smallest sliver of a house at all times. But sometimes, *remembering* my own rule was hard, as I was too busy being in paradise - sniffing at plants, rolling around in the soft grass, pretending to hunt endless amounts of bugs, and even watching out for predators.

But I wasn't pretending in that regard...

As the day went on, and as the sun was slowly beginning to hide behind the trees, the energy around me seemed to change, an

energy that seemed to bring me to be more wary of what was around me, and what *could be* around me. Every little rustle made me jump, and I constantly worried if I was being watched.

So, needless to say, when a voice echoed out through the forest, after what had felt like a lifetime of just rustles and stirs, I felt as if my heart physically jumped and tried to leap out of my mouth.

"Hello?"

I froze at this sound, and it took everything in me not to turn around and run all the way back to my house.

But I stayed put, my heart then pounding so loudly that it was practically deafening as I then heard something large stir behind me. *Holy heck, holy heck, holy heck...*

I then had to muster up every bit of courage that I could find to finally face the sound, turning around to see the figure of a cat approaching me.

Chapter 2

Holy sheep.

All I could do stay stiff, slowly backing away as the shadowy, dark figure continued to come closer to me – not seeming at all intimidated by me. *Which... I'm not sure is a good or bad thing...*

Eventually, I found it in me to finally reply to the mysterious silhouette. "Who... who is that?" I whispered so quietly that I was almost certain that they probably wouldn't hear me.

But honestly, I wouldn't care. At this point, I was more than ready to get the heck out of there. As far as I was concerned, this could be a wild cat, and they had come to chase me out of their territory. *Or worse!*

Sure, I could take the opportunity to drill them with tens of thousands of questions about what it's like to be a wild cat, what it's like to live in the wild, and if the cats actually did leave because of the Twolegs...

And maybe it was this thought that still kept me from running away. So, I only watched as the cat finally came into sight.

And to my relief, it didn't even look remotely malicious or predatory. However, there was still something about his presence that intimidated me... besides the fact that they were a stranger.

From the cat's build and size, it seemed to be about the same age as I was. The cat – a tom – was white-furred with some black splotches and blue eyes.

And to my disappointment, something about his scent and his look caused me to deduce that he definitely wasn't a wild cat – rather, a housecat like me. *Darn it...*

Either way, I had decided I wasn't going to run away from him, so I figured that the next plan of action was to attempt to establish some sort of civility. "H-hi, there..." I meowed, slightly cringing as I heard my own voice shake.

And I had to stop myself from cringing back even more as the strange tom spoke again. "Hi," he replied, immediately narrowing his blue eyes and tilting his head. "Why are you so scared?"

For some reason, the fact that this tom could clearly see my fear irked me just a bit, but hopefully *that* didn't show. "Well..." I began after taking a deep breath. "I don't exactly know you... at *all!*"

I then managed to let out an internal breath of relief as this tom then let out a sniff, his eyes seeming to glint with humor. "Sure, but do I look threatening?"

I hesitated and gave a shrug. "I mean... I guess I've been told that anything that is new or uncertain is threatening," I replied honestly.

I then narrowed my own eyes, suddenly thinking strangely of my own instincts. "I really hate to think of it that way, though," I then muttered before shrugging once again and flashing the tom a shy look. "So... sorry."

The tom also shrugged, licking a paw and running it over one of his ears. "I guess you don't need to apologize for being careful," he then

muttered, then proceeding to meet my gaze with squinted lids. "Who are you, anyway?"

I simply gave the tom a kind nod and lash of the tail. "I'm Lily!" I answered. I then let out a small purr of amusement as I sat down. "I'm not from around the forest, if you couldn't tell already!"

"Oh, yeah?" the tom murmured, also sitting down. "Then what are you doing out here?"

I decided to answer honestly, happy that this tom seemed to be matching my energy. "Well... while I'm not from the forest, I really like it!" I replied cheerfully. I then let out a sigh as I began to look at my surroundings. "So, I've been out here exploring, and... pretending to be a wild cat that... maybe doesn't find everything threatening!"

To my surprise, I looked back at the tom to meet wide blue eyes. "A *wild* cat? Really?" he asked, seeming genuinely baffled. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Why not?" I asked, amused by the reaction.

The tom snorted, wrapping his tail around his paws. "I don't know... from what I've been told, they're..." He hesitated for a moment. "They're not very nice, and I need to stay away from them."

I then couldn't help but let out a satisfied grunt at the stranger. "Hm, so it sounds like I'm not the only one that sees unknown things as threatening!"

I then flicked my ears, my heart nearly skipping a beat as the tom then let out a hiss and stood up. "Hey, they're not unknown to me!" he demanded. "My mother has told me about the wild cats – she *knew* some of them, and that they were horrible to her. That's all I need to hear!"

I held back a contemptuous sniff. *Geez...* "Well, goodness..." I murmured, then taking a moment to think. "I mean, I suppose I haven't heard the best of things, either," I went on, reflecting on all of the rumors I'd heard from fellow housecats, and even Smudge.

"But... they can't be all bad, right? Especially if I join them!"

When the tom simply laughed, I decided to see if I could find out more about him. *I'm already spilling my hopes and dreams to him, for goodness sake!* And something he'd said already piqued my interest. "But you said that your mother knew wild cats? Where are you from?"

"Oh, I live with my mother in the Twolegplace, just a few houses that way," the tom replied, lashing his tail in the opposite direction that Smudge and I had come. "That's how it's been as long as I can remember...."

I then watched, continuing to be intrigued as I watched the tom delve into his own thoughts for a few moments before shaking his head quickly and bringing his attention back to me. "And you?"

I gave an enthusiastic nod. "Oh, me too! Except I'm just a few houses down the other way..." I answered before nearly trailing off. *Should I be telling this stranger where I live?* I asked myself worriedly.

I then let out a small huff, feeling a new rush of determination. *Remember, a wild cat wouldn't see everything as a threat. Rather, a challenge.* "Me and my neighbor always meet up and explore around the Twolegplace," I then continued, my tail beginning to lash back and forth. "I'll have to tell him to stop by your house and say hi to you and your mother!"

The stranger then blinked a few times rapidly, as if he was daunted by the kindness. "Okay!" he then purred. "If I'm not around, just look for a gray fluffy she-cat that might be wandering around the house."

I nodded eagerly once again, so happy that I'd actually managed to establish a friendship with another housecat that didn't live too far from me. "Cool, will do!" I purred back. "I'll definitely tell Smudge to keep an eye out."

I then narrowed my eyes. *Shoot.*

I quickly looked to the sky. While it wasn't quite dusk yet, I could

tell that it was fast approaching.

I let out a sigh, actually feeling guilty that I was having to cut things short. *Princess will surely be looking out for me soon. I have to go.* "Well, while it's been so fun talking to you, I really have to-"

The tom barely seemed to have noticed that I'd spoken again. "Hey, do you want to play a game?"

I flicked my ears, shocked by the tom's initiative and sudden kindness. "Oh, yeah?"

I then glanced at the sky again, just barely still being able to see the sun above the forest trees. *Soon is not now... I suppose that I have some time?* "I love games!" I then meowed excitedly, deciding that the slight delay would be worth it. "Smudge and I love to play tag all of the time, but I tire him out! What did you have in mind?"

"My favorite is definitely hide and seek!" the tom purred, puffing out his chest. "My mother can never find me when we play."

I tilted my head to the side, clearly sensing the challenge in those words. "Oh, yeah? Bet!" I then exclaimed, running over to a tree and lashing my tail towards the tom. "I'll count to twenty, and you hide. I'm sure I'll find you in moments flat!"

I looked back at the tom to find his blue eyes blazing with excitement and confidence. "You're on!" he called out to me before padding off into the forest.

I found myself nearly wanting to burst as the tom disappeared from my sight, and I turned to face my tree. *One, two, three... I can't believe I've made a friend! Six, seven, eight... That's my age! Ten... And we're playing a game! Thirteen, fourteen...*

I then fully focused on counting, trying to be aware of the shuffles I could just barely hear as I heard the black and white tom pad quickly through the area.

I then turned around, holding back a smirk. *Nineteen, twenty!*

I practically pelted away from the tree, filled with determination as

I began my search. But I found that I was quickly growing anxious when I checked within close proximity and didn't find the tom. *Maybe he really is that good...* I thought worriedly.

But it only took me a moment before I let out a huff and shook my head, continuing my search. *Never!* I told myself. *Just be patient. What would a wild cat do in this situation? If they were trying to find an intruder that was hiding?*

I then came to a stop, tilting my head. *I don't think they'd necessarily have to walk in order to figure out where they might be...*

As strange as that sounded in my own head, I still proceeded to simply stop and listen, letting the forest air flow into my nostrils, and hoping for the life of me that I could remember what the mystery tom smelled like.

I then padded around the area, keeping my nose in the air, still trying to stay patient when only the smells of the forest met my nostrils.

But once I passed a large row of bramble bushes, a strange scent seemed to flood into my nose that wasn't as familiar. Is that a cat? Please let it be a cat. And the cat that I know.

Despite my uncertainty, I decided to follow it, now keeping my eyes out as I padded past the row of bushes.

And sure enough, to my amazement, just after a few moments, I heard rustles coming from one of the thick shrubs. *No way!*

Out of my excitement, I then leapt forward without thinking, and I was overcome with victory as I then seemed to bowl over the tom, rolling out of the bushes and then pinning him down on his back. "Ha! Take that!" I exclaimed as I backed off of him. "You're not as great of a hider as you think!" *And... I'm definitely a better tracker than I thought...*

The tom actually seemed to be somewhat irritated that I'd proven him wrong, giving a shake of his fur and letting out a huff. "For all you know, I just went easy on you."

But to my surprise, he then proceeded to look back at me, his blue eyes wide. "How did you do that? I've hidden in that very spot when I played with my mother, and she didn't find me!"

I couldn't help but give another satisfied grunt and a lash of my tail. "I tried to find you like a wild cat, that's what!" I exclaimed proudly. "I found your scent and followed it... I think? And then I hunted you like prey!"

I then flicked my ears in alarm as the tom let out an annoyed hiss, actually showing his large, sharp teeth. "Geez, will you stop it with the wild cats?" he nearly growled.

For a moment, all I could do was stare back at him, shaking my head slowly in amazement. "...Will you stop it with the hating them?"

The tom let out another small hiss, brushing a leaf off of his shoulder before turning away from me. "As far as my mother is concerned, I'm not even supposed to think about them, and you're probably just wasting your time thinking about them too."

Please.

I tried to hold my tongue as the tom then continued. "She told me that they're mean-spirited, vicious, and selfish, and I'm supposed to hate them."

I shifted uncomfortably in my spot just seeing how strongly this tom seemed to believe this, along with his mother. *Is that how I should feel too?* I wondered anxiously. *I mean, like I said, I've never really heard anything good from any of my housecat friends.*

I then furrowed my eyebrows. *But how many have actually* seen *a wild cat? Do they just go off of what they hear?* "Goodness, and you've never actually seen them?" I then pressed to the tom, speaking my thoughts out loud.

The tom turned back to me, his gaze dark as he gave a shrug. "I don't need to."

I then tilted my head. "And you hate them just because your mother

said so?"

The tom then seemed to think for a moment, then met my gaze inquisitively as he sat down. "Well, wouldn't you believe something that your mother told you?"

I then looked up to the trees to contemplate, actually not quite sure how to answer that question given my situation. "Well, I suppose that I *would*," I answered honestly. *I suppose that if Smudge told me something, I'd more than trust his word!*

As expected, the tom was confused by my answer. "*Would?*" he repeated. "What does that mean?"

I nearly purred with amusement as I gave a shrug. "Well..." I meowed. "I have no idea who my mother is!"

I then blinked with shock as the tom let out a small gasp. "Really? I have no idea who my father is!"

My mouth then felt as if it had dropped all the way to the ground – I was almost certain that the tom was lying to pull my tail. "No way! Me too!" I nearly squealed. "Your mother has never talked about him?"

The tom then let out an annoyed huff, looking away for a moment. "Not once! And when I ask, she always changes the subject – it's so annoying!" Then, after a sigh, he met my gaze again. "You've never met either of your parents?"

I shook my head quickly, lashing my tail in excitement at being able to share this with another cat. "I have no idea what their names are, or even what they look like!" I purred, my eyes wide with curiosity. "Smudge has no idea who they are, either! For all I know, they could be wild cats!" *Gosh, imagine that! A kittypet that had wild cat blood and didn't even know it. But that just sounds outrageous!*

I then shook my head quickly, flashing the tom a sympathetic look. While not knowing my parents wasn't necessarily something that upset me, as I had never known or remembered what it was like to be with them, I could imagine that it was frustrating to have a

mother that didn't say a word about a father. "I'm sorry that you don't know your father at all." I murmured kindly to the tom.

While the tom simply sniffed and gave a dismissive lash of his tail, I could tell that he thought a little more of it than that. "It's okay," he simply muttered. "My mother and I are just fine on our own. I don't need a father."

But I didn't pry, simply taking his answer. "That's good then, I suppose!" I purred, before deciding to apologize for something else that clearly had frustrated the tom. "I'm also sorry that I'm bringing up wild cats so much, and if you hate them, that's your right."

I then let out a purr of amusement, crouching down like a hunter for the moment as I lashed my tail excitedly. "But that doesn't mean that I can't track, hunt, and hide like one!"

The tom then backed away a pawstep, his eyes full of bewilderment and amusement. "Yeah?" he then meowed before running over to the same tree that I had stood by earlier. "It's not going to put you at any advantage!"

I then let out a *mrrow* of laughter, beginning to run in the opposite direction. "You just keep telling yourself that!" I called out, overwhelmed with determination once again, as I slid between a couple of bushes. "Hurry! Start counting!"

~>~>~>~>~>~

Although quite a bit of time had likely past, our game of hide and seek only seemed to feel like a few heartbeats, as I was genuinely having so, *so* much fun with this stranger. Sure, he definitely had his strange, cranky moments where I was somewhat ridiculed for doing something as simple as using my nose rather than my eyes, but we still had plenty of fun.

And to be honest, while spending time with Smudge and exploring with him every day was absolutely wonderful, it was somewhat refreshing getting to play with someone my own age, as I didn't get to do that too often.

So, when I eventually decided to look up at the sky again to see it full of orange and a nearly setting sun, I felt a sense of urgency and sadness at the same time. "Aw, gosh-darn it!" I scoffed out loud.

"What?" the tom asked as he began to pad over to the tree once again.

But I simply stood in place, flashing the tom an apologetic look. "I have to go – *really* have to go this time," I admitted as I began to back away. "I promised Smudge that I'd return home by sunset, and he said that he'd slap me with his tail if that didn't happen!"

The tom stopped abruptly, letting out a contemptuous snort as he swiped at a leaf on the ground. "Wow, he sounds terrifying!" he meowed sarcastically, his eyes wide. "Come on, Lily, it's barely dusk! Let's play a few more rounds!"

Even through the guilt that was poking at my stomach, I knew that I had to stand my ground. "Aw, I really wish that I could, but I don't want to worry or upset him."

"But you're a wild cat!" the tom then insisted, nudging my shoulder with his tail. "You can take it if he's a little upset."

I let out a little purr of amusement, but then gave a shrug and shook my head. "Even if that was the case, I don't think that I could." *I have never seen Smudge upset, and I don't want today to be the first time!*

With that thought, I grew significantly more anxious as I continued to back away towards the Twolegplace. "I really have to go. I'm sorry."

Although there was no way I was going to give in, the tom's long, frustrated sigh and eye roll certainly didn't help matters, and I hated to disappoint him. "Ugh, fine," he muttered under his breath, somewhat to my relief, but with how bitter he looked, I'm sure he would have fought it longer. "I guess I'll see you around, then."

I nodded eagerly, trying to lighten the mood. "Of course, definitely!" I meowed enthusiastically. "I'll see you around!"

I then finally fully turned around, beginning to make a run for it to Princess's house as my heart pounded with urgency and nerves. *Dear goodness, I hope that I make it in time! I don't want Smudge to slap me!*

But after a moment, I let out a gasp and nearly skid to a stop. *Wait a moment! A very brief moment!*

I fixed my footing, quickly whipping myself around to see the tom slowly walking away, his tail low but lashing back and forth. "Hey, wait a moment!" I then said out loud.

As the tom then looked over his shoulder, I skittered up to him as fast as I could. "I'm so sorry, I never got your name, did I? What is it?"

I flicked my ears eagerly as the tom fully turned around to face me, his blue eyes narrowed as the setting sun fell on his dark expression. "My name is Darktail," he murmured before turning away and padding off into the forest.

Head Over Paws

[image]

Read on to find out how a certain golden brown tabby tom finally gained the courage to confess to someone very, very special to him...

Thornclaw's POV

You're an amazing friend, Thornclaw.

More annoyingly than a bird deciding to yap in the middle of the night, these words almost seemed to pound in my head as I watched the ThunderClan patrol meant to check for signs of WindClan in the territory leave through the camp entrance - a certain brown tabby tail disappearing through it last.

I forced myself to break my gaze away and sat down, holding back a hiss of frustration with how antsy I was currently feeling, and I was praying to StarClan that no one noticed.

Just moments ago, the ThunderClan had been ambushed by WindClan – the attack having happened while nearly the entire Clan had been asleep. Firestar had luckily been able to stop the entire thing and send Onestar away, but the shock of it all clearly still lingered throughout the camp.

Luckily, I had only come out with a few scratches, along with many of my Clanmates, however, I was incredibly annoyed by how taken by surprise I still was, and how well the attack in general had been executed. *It practically makes me sick,* I thought. *Great StarClan, if anyone attacked WindClan like that, they'd* never *hear the end of it from Onestar.*

But even as infuriating as it all was, I was ashamed to admit to myself that the ambush wasn't the main thing on my mind –

something else was bugging me just a bit more.

Why? Well, I'd become a frail little flower petal, essentially.

I then let out a sigh as I looked back towards the camp entrance once again, where a certain she-cat had disappeared just heartbeats ago. *But flower petal or not, I pray to StarClan that Lilypaw is safe out there...* I then hoped, anxiety for the she-cat being out in the forest looking for WindClan and anxiety at our latest conversation basically swarming around in my head.

Just before Lilypaw had left, and just a bit after WindClan left camp, I had gone up to her to check her wounds and see if she was okay. While I had expressed a bit of excitement to her about the prospect of battle in the past, I was also overwhelmed with fear knowing that this ambush was Lilypaw's first battle, and the first thing I thought to do after it was over was check on her.

But being the fearless she-cat that she was, she of course had acted like they were nothing.

But then, my relief at that news had quickly turned to confusion when she had thanked me as a friend. *Thank you for checking on me. You're an amazing friend, Thornclaw.*

I couldn't help but flinch as those words ran through my mind once again, and for some reason, my stomach seemed to twist with pain. I mean, while it was true that Lilypaw and I had come to be really, really great friends, the fact that she had called me *just that* hurt like a physical wound.

Lilypaw and I had only known each other for a little more than four moons, but it honestly felt as if I'd known her for my entire life. She'd come into ThunderClan as a kittypet, having shown interest in being a "wild cat".

Initially hearing that, of course, I was determined to stay as far away from her as possible and be completely annoyed by her presence.

But when I accidentally bumped into her later that day and began

talking to her, and getting to see her real interest in the Clans, as well as her kindness and wit, I felt that I had to get to know her more, and almost *test* her, in a way. So, I had taken her on her first hunting trip, and from there, we'd only spent more time with each other and had gotten closer and closer.

And... my feelings for her had only gotten stronger and stronger.

I had to admit, I had hoped that we would one day become more than friends for a while now, and I had hoped and thought that she felt the same.

But either way, why did hearing "friend" hurt so much?

I then had to hold back another frustrated hiss as I gave a quick shake of my head. *For StarClan's sake, Thornclaw, just forget it for now. Why can't you just forget it?*

I then licked a paw and ran it over one of my ears. None of this should even hurt me. *Even if Lilypaw did want to be just friends, why should that be upsetting to me?* I then wondered. *She is wonderful, kind, so full of energy, and such a fun cat to be around – I should be happy to have her in my life at all.*

I then couldn't help but slightly scoff, giving a contemptuous lash of my tail. *But why am I even thinking so fondly about a kittypet?* I then asked myself, expecting to feel disgusted as I let that sink in.

But, of course, I didn't. I had been asking myself that since I first met Lilypaw, and I never quite knew how to answer it. Admittedly, no kittypet had affected me like this before. *No one has...*

I then sighed, looking back at the camp entrance one last time. *StarClan have mercy on my soul.*

"Whatcha doing there, Thornclaw?"

I then flicked my ears in surprise, being broken out of my daze at the voice I heard next to me. I looked to my side and immediately recognized the white and light ginger pelt of my sister, Brightheart – her head tilted and her one good eye full of concern.

I gave another shake of my head before nodding to her in greeting, my gaze apologetic. "Great StarClan, sorry, Brightheart," I murmured, forcing myself to stand up and wincing in pain at a wound on my back leg. "Just thinking."

"Alright..." Brightheart replied, her eye widening as she watched me stand up, and her gaze falling on my leg. "My goodness, are you okay? That looks nasty."

I simply gave a shrug as I followed her gaze. "Nasty... but not deep," I reassured the she-cat. "I'll be a bit sore tomorrow, but it's nothing to worry about."

I then looked back at Brightheart, growing a bit concerned myself as I noticed the large wound on her flank, which, luckily, already seemed to have a poultice applied to it. "What about that wound, there?" I asked her, gesturing to her wound with my tail. "It looks like Leafpool has already gotten ahold of it."

To my surprise, my sister looked down shyly at my words. "Well, I actually applied this poultice myself – Leafpool and Jaypaw were so busy, and since I know a bit about things like this... I decided to save them the trouble," she admitted, her paws shuffling back and forth.

But just after a moment, she shook her head and met my gaze, her blue eye narrowed. "Are you sure that you don't need me to help you?"

I was still staring back at her, my head nodding in amazement. "Wow, I'm impressed!" I meowed in response to my sister's initiative. While I was certain that she would never become a medicine cat herself, Brightheart had picked up many of the skills involved so quickly, and had been such a big help to Leafpool and Cinderpelt recently. *I'm a proud brother, I'll admit.*

I then gave a lash of my tail and a reassuring nod. "And no, thank you," I then meowed, answering my sister's question. "I'm fine, really."

But Brightheart continued to simply stare, her eye still narrowed.

"Are you sure?"

I then felt myself having to hold back an annoyed huff. "Yes, Brightheart, I really am okay," I then muttered, flashing her a confused look.

"Are you really sure?"

I then couldn't help but let out an irritated, but amused snort as my sister continued to press, for whatever reason. "If you're so good at this medicine cat stuff, I would think that you'd be able to answer that yourself."

I then felt my own eyes narrowing as Brightheart herself let out a snort. "Well, I suppose that I can," she muttered, nudging my shoulder with her tail. "You've got a pretty bad wound, Thornclaw."

"Brightheart, I told you that it's not that deep," I hissed to her through gritted teeth.

I could barely stand to look back at Brightheart and see her smug look and gleaming blue eye. "Sure," she then meowed. I then felt my fur begin to bristle when she suddenly put her tail to my chest. "And I'm telling you that that's not what I meant."

Great StarClan.

I immediately knew what my sister was trying to say, and it made me want to rip something to shreds.

However, I simply closed my eyes, let out a sigh, and then looked back at my sister. "If that were the case, I would be dead."

Brightheart rolled her eye, sighing and pulling her tail away. "Funny," she purred, her eye then washing over with concern once again. "So, are you okay, Thornclaw?"

I sighed and gave her a hard stare, very well beginning to realize the game that was being played here, and *not* wanting to play it whatsoever. "For the third time, it's not that deep," I murmured, not even waiting for Brightheart to reply before turning around and beginning to pad away. "I'm going to help Dustpelt and Brackenfur

repair the apprentice's den."

I then actually felt my fur begin to bristle in alarm when Brightheart actually pelted forward to intercept me. "Oh, no you're not, brother! That's the last thing that you want to do, and you know it," she then exclaimed, her gaze full of mischief. "You have too much on your mind to even be helpful."

I held back another hiss, breaking my gaze away from her. *Geez, why do you have to be so emotionally intelligent!?* As much as I hated to admit it, Brightheart was right. But there was no way that I was going to admit that to her out loud.

I found that I could only sigh and sit down, brooding as my sister seemed to give a satisfied nod. "So, my heart is wounded?"

Brightheart also sat down, her gaze still gleaming. "You tell me."

I flashed Brightheart an indignant look, my defenses still up. "Bold of you to assume that there's even anything going on."

Brightheart then seemed to be holding back a purr of amusement as she scooted closer to me. "Bold of you to assume that I didn't just watch the encounter between you and a certain she-cat, and your crestfallen expression after she left."

Gosh darn-it.

I took a deep breath, trying to contain the immense amount of frustration I felt at having to focus on the thing that I had been trying to avoid, and disoriented me whenever I actually thought about it.

So, I didn't speak for a few moments, my head low, before forcing myself to look up at my sister once again. "That's creepy," I meowed simply.

"Thornclaw, for StarClan's sake, I probably wasn't the only one," Brightheart then sighed, pushing my shoulder with her tail as her eye glowed with amazement. "The fact that you've warmed up to Lilypaw in the way that you have has baffled some of our Clanmates, you know."

I nearly cringed at my sister's words. *The last thing that I want to hear is that name right now.* "*Warmed up* to her? How?" I meowed defensively, using any means possible to get out of this conversation, even though I knew very well that it was too late.

So, I tried to avoid Brightheart's gaze as she replied to me, but I could easily see her roll her eye and hear her snort. "Well, teaching a cat how to hunt, sharing prey with a cat, and talking with a cat that much definitely isn't *cold*."

Feeling a sudden wave of annoyance, I held back a hiss and shot my gaze back to Brightheart. "There's such a thing as being nice, you know," I muttered to her. "Why are cats so shocked by that?"

I then felt my eyes narrowing as Brightheart leaned closer to me, a single eyebrow raised. "Cat's eyes don't sparkle like a sky full of Silverpelt when they're simply being nice."

"They're sparkling with joy at the thought of welcoming in a newcomer. I can't welcome in a newcomer?"

"Thornclaw, sometimes you don't even give your own *Clanmates* the time of day!" Brightheart then sighed, already looking exasperated. I then looked to my side, trying to avoid her gaze once again as she took a pawstep closer to me. "Clearly you feel something for Lilypaw."

When I simply sighed and rolled my eyes in response, continuing to avoid this conversation in any way that I could to spare my feelings, she continued, to my dismay. "And you know that I wouldn't bother you with this if I didn't truly believe it," she then meowed, her voice a little quieter, and full of sincerity.

I then just barely shifted my head to look back towards her, watching as she sat back down and gave a shrug. "Hey, I mean, and I don't blame you – she's very kind, smart, daring, such a joy to be around..." She then gave me a small nudge. "And she's not too bad on the looks side either."

You think? Great StarClan, she's all of that and more... But instead of saying that, I let out a husky sigh and nudged my sister back. "Then

you should go and ask her to be your mate."

Brightheart gave a small purr. "Hm, I like Cloudtail a bit too much."

I then gave her a hard, accusatory stare. *Well, lucky you.* "And why are you convinced that I like Lilypaw that much?"

Brightheart simply gave another shrug. "Because you do."

I had to screw my eyes shut for a moment as my irritation continued to bubble up inside of me, and as simple and *annoying* as my sister's response was, it hit as much of a nerve as any intelligent sentence would. It probably was obvious that I had feelings for Lilypaw.

But still not wanting to confront my latest situation with Lilypaw, Brightheart still couldn't know that. So, I decided to give her an even better comeback. "But she's a kittypet."

But Brightheart probably was barely listening to a word that I said at this point. "And apparently that hasn't stopped you from completely falling for her!" she then exclaimed, standing up and her one good eye widening.

Great StarClan, Brightheart!

I shifted uncomfortably, having a harder time dodging with each thing that my sister said. "And what makes you think that I'm falling for her?" I meowed, immediately shutting my eyes after I'd spoken, realizing that my voice had cracked. *Great. I'm grieving, and now I'm turning back into an awkward apprentice.*

I then forced myself to look at back at Brightheart, seeing that she looked completely baffled that I'd asked that question. "Thornclaw, because every time you look at her, you look as if you're staring at a juicy piece of prey!"

I then nearly let out an appalled gasp, standing up and staring shockingly back at Brightheart. "*Excuse* me?" I nearly yowled back at my sister. "I'm not some twisted, pop-eyed creep!"

But she wasn't phased at all, simply staring back at me with a clear

gaze. "Hey – you said it, not me."

I then let out a defensive, still completely blown-over huff as I rolled my eyes. "Please!" I then exclaimed, giving a sharp lash of my tail. "I'm in love with her; I'm not going to watch her while she sleeps!"

It was then in that moment that I realized that Brightheart had just succeeded in her mission.

And I felt a horrible, horrible sinking feeling as I realized what I had just said in my fit.

And there were many, *many* moments of silence as I mentally punched myself in the face with my tail, simply letting my shame sink in as Brightheart stared at me, her good eye narrowed.

Eventually, after many long, unbearable moments of silence, I finally let out a huff and sat down. "Darn it," I then muttered as I stared down at my paws.

I then rolled my eyes as I heard Brightheart give a satisfied grunt. "I knew I'd get it out of you eventually," she murmured. I then flicked my ears in surprise, my eyes widening in alarm as she then let out a squeal. I then looked back at her to see her practically jumping for joy. "Thornclaw, this is incredible! Do you realize how big of a deal this is?"

I could barely stand to see her excitement, for she didn't know nearly as much as I did, and she surely wouldn't be excited anymore once she knew what was really going on. "No, I don't," I muttered bitterly as I then stood up, walking past Brightheart, fighting ruthlessly at the pain that was tugging at my pelt. "Because it's not a big deal, and it's not worth it to make it one."

I could feel Brightheart's concerned gaze practically burning into my pelt as I walked away, and she quickly ran to catch up to me. "Why?" she then meowed, her voice full of genuine concern.

I then came to a stop, giving my sister a weak shrug as I turned to face her. "Because it's all one-sided, Brightheart," I sighed, both

relieved and upset that I was getting a chance to confide in someone about this – because I was getting to get everything out of my head, but at the same time, getting it out of my head made it feel all-the-more real.

I then gave a lash towards the camp entrance before sitting down once again. "I sometimes worried that it was, and tonight I got it confirmed."

Brightheart also sat down as she stared at me with a gaze full of concern and sympathy. "So, that's what the whole encounter was about?"

I simply nodded to her, then giving her an inquisitive look, having been under the impression that she had completely creeped on the conversation that me and Lilypaw had had. "I couldn't hear a thing that you said to each other," she then confirmed for me, her eye widening with reassurance. "I... I just noticed how sad you looked when Lilypaw left with Cloudtail's patrol."

I then let out a sigh and shrugged, trying to tell myself that it was in my best interest to tell Brightheart specifically what had happened. "Well, to make a short story even shorter..." I eventually murmured. "She called me a friend. An 'amazing friend'."

I was actually surprised to hear Brightheart let out a sniff, and I looked at her to see her eye actually glimmering with humor and confusion. "That's... horrible?"

I had to hold back a hiss, amazed that Brightheart already seemed to not be taking this seriously. "It is if you have feelings for a cat, and they show that they don't return them."

Brightheart continued to act nonchalantly, giving a shrug and sitting down next to me. "Sure, of course, but..." she then hesitated, seeming to take a moment to gather her thoughts. "Are you sure that that's necessarily what that means? You all *are* friends. *Best* friends at this point."

"I know, but... to me, it felt like she was putting a message across," I sighed in reply, my words suddenly flowing out of me before

seeming to even think about them first. "Sure, friends tell friends that they're good friends to each other, but... lately it's felt like we were maybe heading towards being more than friends, and I thought that Lilypaw maybe saw that too?"

As I then spoke those words, my stomach only seemed to flutter for a moment before it fell as heavy as a rock once again. "What if she's realized that, doesn't feel the same way, and felt that she needed to let me know that in some subtle way?"

I then stared wide-eyed back at Brightheart, internally pleading for an answer, but only watching as she stared thoughtfully back at me. "Wow, it sure seems like you've thought about this a lot," she then nearly whispered, her voice actually somewhat thick with emotion as she shook her head slowly. "This whole... *situation* must really mean a lot to you."

I simply sighed in reply. *Again, you think?* I then thought. *Geez, if I told myself six moons ago that a pretty kittypet would occupy my mind this much, I'd send myself to the medicine den!*

I then broke myself away from my thoughts, startled as Brightheart gave me another nudge. "But I only have to think a little bit to know what is really going on."

I snorted and looked at my sister, one of my eyebrows raised. "So you realized that I've been rejected more quickly than I did."

"Thornclaw, I really don't think that is the case," Brightheart insisted softly as she wrapped her tail around my shoulders. "Listen, I don't know Lilypaw incredibly well yet, but I know what it's like to fall for a tom."

I sighed and rolled my eyes at her. "Don't make me feel more hopeless than I already am by telling me the story of how you fell for Cloudtail," I breathed, that being the last thing I wanted to hear – for many reasons.

Brightheart purred with amusement, pulling me closer to her and touching my ear affectionately with her nose. "I wasn't going to. I was just trying to make a point," she reassured me before fully lying

down on the camp ground, gesturing for me to do the same. "Now listen, it seems pretty clear to me that Lilypaw feels the same way that you do."

I shook my head softly as I did so. "Foxdung."

"Oh, don't act like you're shocked, Thornclaw – I'm sure you thought she did too up until she dropped the StarClan-forbidden *f-word*," she meowed to me, her gaze hard and full of determination as she spoke. "Thornclaw, it's not like you were forcing her to go on hunting trips with you, or forcing her to talk with you as much as she does."

She then gave me a nudge, and I fully faced her again to see a gleaming, narrowed blue eye. "And you most certainly can't force those peculiar eyes of hers to sparkle like they do whenever she's with you."

With those words, I couldn't help but look down at my paws, my ears growing hot and my stomach twisting up into a knot. "I suppose not..." I murmured, having the same reaction currently as I did whenever I met those sparkling, peculiar, but beautiful eyes.

"And even when she's not next to you, she still shows how much she cares for you," Brightheart then went on before meeting my gaze excitedly. "You want to know something?"

I sighed yet again, trying to hide at my excitement at what my sister might share with me, and trying to keep my expectations low. "What?"

"A few days ago, just before you arrived into camp with Sol, when Brambleclaw first noticed that the dawn patrol you were on hadn't come back yet..." Brightheart began, her head seeming to shake slowly with amazement. "I can't even begin to describe with you how worried Lilypaw looked."

I rolled my eyes, glad that I had kept my expectations low. "She's the sweetest cat on earth, Brightheart. Of course she'd worry about the dawn patrol being missing."

Brightheart barely acknowledged my words, only shrugging before going on. "Sure, but... as soon as it was asked who was on the patrol and Brambleclaw said your name, she looked as if he'd just said that a badger ate you alive," she meowed, looking as if she wanted to burst with excitement at getting to share this with me. "Even just now, as she left, I could tell that she was apprehensive to leave you."

I broke away from Brightheart's gaze and screwed my eyes shut, trying my best to ignore my stomach that fluttered as if there were dozens of butterflies stuffed in it. For one, it all seemed too good to be true, and I felt that I'd only be hurting myself by believing it, and secondly, Lilypaw's latest words to me always seemed to stay at the forefront of my mind.

Brightheart seemed to notice this, and continued to budge. "Lilypaw really cares for you, Thornclaw," she then meowed softly to me. "And I'm sure that she's just as worried as you are that you might not feel the same way."

I then flicked my ears in surprise as my sister then stood up, her gaze full of certainty and urging staring down at me. "But there's no way that you can know for sure unless you say something," she then mewed, her voice sharp and clear. "I can tell that you want to, and you've already made it clear that you want to be more with Lilypaw."

She then let out a quick, amazed sigh. "No cat can deny how happy she makes you, and the fact that she was a kittypet makes it more incredible, but you clearly forgot about that within heartbeats!" I then rolled my eyes as she let out another squeal. "You said that you're in *love* with her, for StarClan's sake! My brother is *in love* with someone!"

Immediately after my sister's enthusiastic words, I let out a sigh and closed my eyes, having processed and fully ruminated every single word she had uttered to me.

And having processed and ruminated as much as I did, I finally was able to take what Brightheart had said in consideration, as well as piece together all of the worries, thoughts, hopes and everything in-

between that had been swirling through my head for moons now, and speak them aloud. "I get it," I had meowed just after Brightheart's words.

I then let out another sigh as I stood up. "And I know," I breathed, my heart pounding in my ears as I went on, and my stomach continuing to tie itself into knots. "Lilypaw is very, very special to me, and I suppose that the talk that me and her just had made me realize that even more."

I then let out a sniff, shaking my head slowly in bewilderment at myself. "The fact that she called me a *friend* and it hurt so much... Great StarClan, it shows that these aren't feelings that I can shake very easily."

I then thought for a moment, staring at my paws and shaking my head. "Sure, I could learn to live with that, but..." I then looked wide-eyed back at Brightheart. "I wonder how hard it would be to hide my feelings? Brightheart, she's so kind, compassionate, adventurous, open-minded, brilliant, and... and she's beautiful."

I then had to hold back a purr rising in my throat as thoughts of Lilypaw began to take over my mind, my head practically feeling light. "I can't even tell you how many times already I've gotten lost into those hazel eyes, and my heart wants to explode and flip upside down," I murmured. "And spending time with her is incredible – she's one of the few cats I feel like I can be myself with, and she makes me purr and laugh like no one else."

I then closed my eyes, still hardly being able to believe that these words were coming out of my mouth. "I care about her more than I thought I could for a cat, and I was so worried that I was going to lose her in this ambush tonight," I then meowed, a chill running down my spine as I recalled the moment that I realized that Lilypaw would be fighting in that battle, and I had already been picturing what it'd be like to have to live without her. "For a moment... I actually thought that she would never get to know how I feel. How much I..."

I then closed my eyes and took a deep breath, forcing those thoughts away as I stood up, turning to face the camp entrance once

again. "But when she gets back, I'm going to tell her," I meowed with certainty, all of my worries suddenly disappearing for a moment as adrenaline rushed my blood, and the slight breeze brushed my fur.

I then sniffed with amusement, looking back at Brightheart. "And if she doesn't feel the same way, then hey..."

I then look back at the entrance, giving the smallest shrug. "At least I know I've got her as a friend."

Keeping Friends Closer

[image]

Read on to watch the interaction between two cats, prior to the event that turned everything around...

Lilypaw's POV

My stomach was practically hurting from how much I was laughing as I watched the dark ginger pelt of Squirrelflight prance around me – her meows only coming out in squeals.

I then raised my eyebrows in surprise as she stopped, taking a deep breath. "Okay, you need to tell me again," the she-cat purred, sitting down and then scooting closer to me. "So, how did he approach you before he confessed? What do you think made him decide to finally confess?"

I shook my head slowly, actually having to catch my breath myself as I began to relay what had happened between Thornclaw and me just days ago. "Okay, well..." I murmured, cocking an eyebrow for a moment as I internally gathered details. "Him finally deciding to confess, well... I think it was the same thing that made me want to confess if he hadn't beaten me to it!"

I then purred once again as Squirrelflight let out a huff and rolled her green eyes. "Oh, yes – the accidental friend-zoning - heard about that."

I copied her, also giving a lash of my tail. "Yeah, yeah, my mistake – it worked out!" I jokingly dismissed. "When it comes to how he approached me before the confessing... he came into the medicine den after I had..."

I trailed off, giving another roll of my eyes and sighing. "...passed out after the eclipse battle..." I then muttered almost inaudibly, trying to ignore Squirrelflight's snickers as I did so.

But quickly, those feelings of contempt went away as I was brought back to the moment I currently was re-living, and my stomach felt as if it were hollowing out as I continued to describe it all to my friend. "And then he came up to me, gave me a mouse, and said that he'd hunted it for me."

Squirrelflight then squealed once again, her eyes widening. "For *you?*"

"No, he showed it to me and said that he had hunted it for Purdy!" I teased before purring with amusement. "Yes, for me!"

Squirrelflight then nearly jumped in the air as she let out another squeal. "This is too adorable and sweet for me to handle! Then what?"

I then found my ears growing hot as I went on. "Well, that was when he asked me if I had a moment to talk, took me out into the forest, and then told me that he loved me..." I purred softly, my heart pounding and my fur tingling as I looked shyly down at the ground – *just as I already have countless amounts of times in the last few days...* "And I told him that I loved him back."

I looked back up to see Squirrelflight's green eyes glowing with such genuine excitement for me, her tail lashing back and forth. "Aw, wow! *Wow!*" She exclaimed before brushing her tail against my shoulder. "Lilypaw, I am so, so happy for you!"

I gave the she-cat a nod. "Aw, thanks, Squirrelflight, really," I meowed warmly, returning her gesture. "I can only hope to have a relationship like you and Brambleclaw have."

I then looked over my shoulder, where Squirrelflight's mate happened to be sharing a meal with two of their kits – Lionpaw and Hollypaw. "You two seem so happy, really, and you have such beautiful and wonderful kits."

I was then surprised to look back at Squirrelflight, and actually catch her eyes briefly flashing with guilt. "Aw, thank you, Lily," she then replied in a strangely underwhelming way.

But nevertheless, I continued, hoping that I had just been looking too much into things. *It's not new!* "Of course! I'm only telling the truth," I went on enthusiastically. "Seriously, if Thornclaw and I ever decide to have kits, if they're half the cats that your kits have become, I'll be happy."

I have to admit, it was slightly unnerving when Squirrelflight's demeanor didn't change. She actually began to shift uncomfortably, looking down at her paws, as she then meowed, "Ah, well, I'm incredibly proud of them."

I then raised my eyebrows with intrigue as the she-cat finally met my gaze again, but she still shifted about, her gaze anxious and almost, frantic? "So... um..." she then hesitated. "How was your last trip to the dirtplace?"

My eyes widened, and I found myself leaning towards the she-cat with my eyebrows raised. "*What?"*

"Lilypaw!"

Barely having time to process my friend's question, I whipped my head over my shoulder at what seemed like the sound of my leader's voice. And sure enough, I just barely caught the flame-colored pelt of Firestar padding through the bramble screen of the medicine den entrance.

As I quickly stood up, I thought that I could hear Squirrelflight whisper "thank StarClan" from behind me.

I then looked back at the dark ginger she-cat, flashing her a confused, yet amused look. *Yeah, I second that...*

I then turned away, running up to meet my leader. "Over here, Firestar!"

Firestar immediately responded to my call, glancing over at me and giving me a nod in greeting as he walked over to join me. "Good, and..." I then watched as Firestar narrowed his green eyes, scanning them around the camp clearing.

After a few heartbeats, he paused, his gaze seeming to be set on one

of my Clanmates. "Ashfur!" he then called out, lashing his tail just once. "Could you join us over here, please?"

I followed my leader's gaze to see the gray-speckled tom sharing a meal with Dustpelt just under the Highledge. When Firestar called his name, he quickly stood up, gave a farewell to Dustpelt, and then seemed to make his way over to the two of us.

Weirdly, halfway through his travel, I noticed him practically stop in his tracks, and his blue gaze seemed to be looking at something beyond where Firestar and I were standing.

I couldn't help but look behind me to try and get a gander of what he might be staring at so coldly, and to my surprise, it was exactly where the dark ginger pelt of Squirrelflight was still currently standing. Squirrelflight herself didn't look too pleased either, actually *backing up* a pawstep, her stance very defensive.

I narrowed my eyes, this whole encounter immediately piquing my interest. *Strange...* "Hey, Squilf-"

Squirrelflight quickly cut off the concern I was about to express, continuing to back away from me. "Hey, Lilypaw, I'll see you later," she meowed almost incomprehensibly as she then began to trot over to where her mate and kits were still settled by the fresh-kill pile. "Count on telling me the whole story again, okay?"

All I could think to do was nod quickly at the she-cat, flashing her a look of understanding. "O-okay!" I called out to her. "I'll see you later!"

After staring off worriedly at my friend for a few moments, I then looked back at Ashfur to barely catch him letting out a sigh and rolling his eyes, before finally walking up to meet Firestar and me.

And rudely, I didn't even give my Clanmate a greeting as I delved deep into my thoughts, wondering why the heck Squirrelflight had suddenly seemed so determined to make herself scarce.

Or... why Ashfur seemed to be the reason why.

I mean, why was he looking at her like that? It's almost like he didn't

care that any other cat could potentially see him... I asked myself. *And the fact that Squirrelflight was also so visibly uncomfortable is a whole other story...*

I then narrowed my eyes, having to admit to myself that this actually wasn't the first time that I had noticed something like this between them. *In fact, something has seemed off to me since the first day that I joined ThunderClan around five moons ago...*

But I then quickly let out a snort, shaking my head. *Then again, I was fresh out of the kittypet life – I still somewhat am – when I was around so many gossiping she-cats. Their life's work was to make something out of nothing!* I then reassured myself. For all I knew, Squirrelflight was just leaving because Firestar hadn't asked for her, and Ashfur was confused as to why she was there.

But either way, I couldn't ponder any of that anymore – Firestar was literally talking.

"If the two of you aren't doing anything right now, would you mind heading out into the forest and finding some marigold?" the leader meowed before nervously glancing over his shoulder at the medicine den behind him. "Leafpool and Jaypaw apparently are running low, and neither of them can spare a moment to get it themselves."

I quickly shook my head at Firestar once he looked back and Ashfur and me. "I'm not doing a thing!" I replied enthusiastically, excited to be given a mission so vital. "That's no problem at all!"

Firestar gave a brief purr of amusement, giving me a nod. "Wonderful," he meowed before averting his gaze to the cat beside me. "Ashfur?"

I blinked in confusion when there wasn't immediately a response, and I looked over at Ashfur to find him appearing very distracted.

And surprisingly... but not surprisingly at all – he wasn't even looking at Firestar or me, but was looking towards where Squirrelflight had settled down with Brambleclaw and her kits, his deep blue gaze dark.

It actually sent a chill down my spine. Yeah... I then thought. I know what I've been seeing. Those gossiping she-cats have got nothing on me.

Just a moment after that, Ashfur flicked his ears and finally spoke. "Hm?" I then watched as he shook his head quickly, as if to bring himself back into focus, before looking back at Firestar. "Yes, that's fine with me too. How much do we need to gather?"

I only flashed the gray tom a brief look of concern before also glancing back at Firestar, and if the leader himself had noticed Ashfur's weirdness, he wasn't showing it at all. "I'm sure that they'll take whatever they can get," he answered, his green eyes full of worry. "At least a few of our Clanmates have infected wounds from the eclipse battle, and the marigold is going fast."

Ashfur and I then managed to exchange an anxious look. "My goodness, then we'll try to do what we can!" I reassured the leader, likely looking more hopeful than I actually was. *StarClan grant we find some...* I thought nervously as images of Squirrelflight actually flashed into my mind. She had gotten some nasty wounds from the battle, but none of them had ever become infected. *Surely, thanks to marigold... uh, oh.*

I then pulled out of my own thoughts as I noticed Ashfur already beginning to back away towards the ThunderClan camp entrance. "I'd say that we *will* do what we can," the tom muttered. "Ferncloud's been in the medicine den this whole time with an infected wound, and I haven't liked sitting around waiting for it to get worse."

As I then flashed Ashfur a compassionate look, so proud that the slightly older warrior was getting an opportunity to help his sister, Firestar also gave a satisfied nod.

"Thank you both," the leader beamed before glancing up at the sky. "If you can't find any by the time the sun begins to set – StarClan forbid – you all can just return here and let me know."

"StarClan forbid, indeed!" I exclaimed to Firestar as I then began to follow Ashfur, who had already nearly made it to the gorse tunnel.

"Don't worry, Firestar! We'll try our best to find something."

I then paused for a moment, flicking my ears as I glanced at Ashfur's gray-speckled tail disappearing through the camp entrance. "I mean, we *will* find something!"

I then lashed my tail in farewell to Firestar, whose eyes were shining with humor, before I finally quickened my pace to follow Ashfur into the forest.

And by the time I had crawled through the other side, it actually took me a moment to figure out where Ashfur was, as he had already seemed to have made his way deeper into the forest. But I almost immediately caught his gray pelt just a few fox-lengths away, and I trotted ahead to keep up with his brisk pace.

But it only took me a moment to process that his pace wasn't as "brisk" as it had appeared. Yes, he was walking quickly, but it almost appeared as if it was to blow off steam; his expression was pensive, and his fur was actually somewhat bristled.

For a moment, I was actually worried to utter a word – scared that I would anger him by breaking into some weird, brooding thoughts of his.

Overall, he just looked a bit uncomfortable. Sure, maybe it was because the two of us didn't know each other too well, and now we were being sent on an expedition alone that could potentially take us the rest of the day.

But honestly, I would be a bit surprised if it was because of me, as I actually considered me and Ashfur to be friendly – we'd both been on the patrol to see if WindClan had left our territory after their ambush, and according to Thornclaw, Ashfur had helped me get back to camp after I had... passed out after the eclipse battle.

I couldn't help but stare ahead at his gray-speckled pelt as I continued to think. *Well, maybe he's just anxious about Ferncloud not having recovered from her battle wounds, and that we might not find marigold to help her?*

I then let out an almost inaudible sigh, breaking my gaze from the older warrior's back. *Please. That's definitely part of it, but I'm also socially aware enough to put two and two together – something about Squirrelflight's presence in those couple of moments definitely messed with him. But why?*

I then shook my head quickly, forcing myself to forget about that topic once again and focus on the mission – getting this uncomfortable silence to end. "So, have you ever been sent out to collect herbs as a warrior?" I asked Ashfur jokingly, quickening my pace just a little. "Seems like a downgrade, huh?"

As I asked the question, I tried to suppress the cringy-ness that was welling up in my stomach. *Hey, it's better than "how was your last trip to the dirtplace?".*

In front of me, Ashfur simply shrugged and gave a sniff. "It's definitely not my favorite thing," he answered simply. "If it hadn't been so urgent, I probably would have sent Lionpaw in my place."

I purred with amusement in an attempt to lighten the mood. "Fair enough!" I then replied. "I would have sent a cat that knows absolutely *anything* about herbs in my place."

To my surprise, Ashfur actually also let out a small purr. "I can't help but second that."

I then raised my eyebrows, continuing to be surprised as he actually slowed his pace so that he was walking beside me. "Can I be honest?"

I tilted my head, already imagining the endless possibilities of what he could say. *Me and Squirrelflight have enough tension between us to cut a boulder in half.* "Sure, have at it!"

Ashfur then somewhat leaned towards my ear, whispering, "I have no idea what marigold looks like, or where to find it."

Hm, that works too.

I then purred with amusement at the tom's words, and then gave a shrug. "If I'm also being honest, I'm right there with you," I replied

to the tom, my voice still full of laughter. Gosh-darn us for never being infected. "Leafpool and Jaypaw must really be in a bind if they sent Firestar to pick the first two cats that he saw."

Ashfur simply shook his head beside me. "No kidding."

I then briefly took a glance back towards the way we had come. "Do we go back to camp and ask Leafpool or Jaypaw for some direction?"

"No, that would take too long," Ashfur quickly replied, and I realized that he probably still had his injured sister on the brain – there really was no time to waste. "I'm sure we can find some if we just think a little harder."

I then nodded enthusiastically back at the tom, trying to be encouraged by his words despite how grim things were currently looking. "True – we sure as heck aren't anything close to medicine cats, but we've been treated by them, right?"

I then ran ahead of Ashfur, thinking as the two of us traveled through the bright forest – the sunlight leaking through the trees and splashing along our backs. "Well, for starters, marigold is a flower, correct?"

Behind me, I heard Ashfur snort with amusement. "I think that a newborn kit could make that guess."

I then sniffed and rolled my eyes, pausing and waiting for Ashfur to catch up with me as we arrived at a clearing that was just tail-lengths from the stream at WindClan's border. "And who's going to penalize me for that? That eliminates a lot!"

Ashfur then gave a shrug and sat down as he arrived at my side. "You're not wrong..." he then muttered. Then, after the two of us simply sat and pondered for a few moments, I noticed him tilt his head to the side. "This may sound stupid..."

I looked back at the tom with a single eyebrow raised. "Well, I guess we'd be even then, huh?" And when he flashed me an amused, yet stern look, I simply lashed my tail at him. "Go on."

Ashfur then looked ahead, out towards where the lake would be, his blue eyes narrowed and contemplative. "Well, would the 'gold' in marigold indicate that it's maybe some bright yellow or orange color?" Then when he looked back at me to find me simply pondering the question, he let out a huff and frustratedly shook his head. "Forget it."

I quickly put the tip of my tail on his shoulder, flashing him a warm look. "No, that's really good!" I reassured the gray tom. "A bright yellow or orange flower?"

I then excitedly stood up, taking a few pawsteps forward as I grazed my gaze around our forest surroundings. "That's not something that's easy to mix up! If we find that, we've probably got our marigold!"

Although Ashfur didn't show it to the extent that I did, I looked back at him to see his eyes gleaming with hope, and he quickly stood up and followed behind me as I began to pad closer to the lake, beyond the trees.

And as the lake came into sight, I looked back at Ashfur once again as a question came to mind. "And it probably smells pretty good too, right?"

Ashfur then let out another snort as he ran ahead to flank me. "Have you ever found a flower that smelled like crowfood?"

I let out a sniff that was mainly meant just for myself. *Ironically, I don't think that lilies smell amazing, however, that's not smart-alecky enough of an answer.* "Yes," I purred, narrowing my eyes at Ashfur as I held back laughter. "It's actually found in the form of a gray-speckled cat that clearly isn't very detail-oriented."

Ashfur then blinked at me, his ears flicking as he let out another snort. "Please. I'll find them before you do."

I then let out a *mrrow* of laughter as Ashfur left my side, trotting to a clearing that was several tail-lengths away. "Oh, found them."

I let out a gasp and whipped myself around to face the tom – pretty

much certain already that he had to be messing with me. "What? Are you pulling my tail?" I exclaimed as I then began to run up to the clearing that he had settled at. "That would be-"

I then cut off my own words, feeling almost physically bowled over as my eyes immediately fell on the bright orange flowers in front of me.

And they smelled pretty darn good.

After inhaling the wonderful scent, I let out a satisfied grunt and stared amazed back at Ashfur. "My goodness, you actually found marigold!"

Ashfur then gave a sniff as he scanned his eyes around the abundant clump of flowers spread out in front of us. "Or rather, I found a bright orange-yellow flower that smells good, that we are assuming to be marigold."

After purring with amusement at the tom's comment, I looked up at the sky to get a gander of the time we had left – and unfortunately, while the sun was still bright and fairly high in the sky, I knew that it wouldn't be long before the sky turned orange, and the sun began to disappear behind the trees. "I suppose at this point, we'll just have to take our chances..."

Then, as if the panic of the situation had hit the both of us at the exact same time, we both practically dove into the pile of flowers to begin collecting as much of them as we could.

And to make this obviously tedious task feel just a little less tedious, I decided to begin a conversation – feeling much more comfortable doing so this time around. "Hm, I suppose this still feels like a noble Clan cat mission, even if we're not hunting or fighting," I meowed cheerfully to Ashfur. "We're saving cats, right?"

Ashfur sniffed and gave a shrug. "Sure. And even though you're just an apprentice, you've experienced enough to make that call, I'd say."

I actually was uplifted by the tom's words, picturing all that I had

been able to experience and do since I had become a Clan cat – more than I had ever experienced in my life as a kittypet. It was perfectly wonderful and dandy... but nothing like this. "I guess so!" I purred, agreeing with the tom. "Not every apprentice can say that they got to fight in a battle between *all* of the Clans... where the *sun disappeared*," I reminisced, my heart practically lifting as I thought about all of it.

I then looked down shyly, my heart warming up to match the sun's as another memory crossed my mind. "And, well... I've been hunting since my second day in ThunderClan."

To my amusement, Ashfur was nodding out of the corner of my eye, as if he had immediately picked up on the implications of that comment. "Yeah... a certain friend of mine was pretty kind to help you with that," he muttered. Then, after the two of us shared a brief purr of amusement, he looked back down at his marigold. "I heard that the two of you have decided to become more than friends, huh?"

I also looked back down at the flowers I was collecting, growing shy and bashful once again. "Yes, we have," I meowed, my ears grew hot and another purr rising in my throat as Ashfur reminded me of the spectacular fact once again.

But as exciting as it all was to me, I didn't want to gush about my love life to all of my Clanmates. "I'm not mad at it," I simply muttered as I picked another piece of marigold.

Ashfur then sniffed with humor. "I would hope not."

I then found myself looking back up at the tom in curiosity as I heard him let out a sigh. "But that's great," he then meowed despite the obviously very contemptuous sigh. "Thornclaw deserves a bit of softness in his life for that hard head of his."

I tried to joke along with the tom and push away my curiosity. "Ha! And I suppose that I need a bit of hardness for my soft kittypet head!"

After the two of us shared yet another laugh, we then both looked

down at our flowers once again, simply concentrating on getting as much as possible to bring back to camp.

At least, that's probably how Ashfur saw it – the silence was giving me time to hesitate and wonder whether or not I should reciprocate the question that he had just asked me.

Sure, it was a question just for the sake of continuing to make conversation, but at the same time, I was so, *so* curious to see what he would say. *The way that Ashfur was looking at Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight earlier... it really makes me wonder if...*

I then took a deep breath, deciding I was going to let my curiosity get the better of me. For all that Ashfur knew, I had not observed anything about him and Squirrelflight, and he hopefully wouldn't have any reason to suspect anything.

I almost immediately took another breath, still nervous despite my certainty. *Also, if he's at least a decent cat, he won't be offended by those kinds of questions.* "Um... if you don't mind me asking, do you have a special cat in your life?"

To my complete horror and dismay, he didn't answer immediately, just as I had feared, and he stopped picking at his marigold, to make things worse.

And that moment of silence felt like an eternity, but surely was longer in my own head than it actually was. However, I panicked, and felt that I had to fill it. "No need to answer if that's too invasive, I mean-"

I then cut myself off, startled as Ashfur then aggressively ripped several marigold flowers from their stems all at once. "No," he answered simply as he then placed the flowers in his little pile. "No, I don't."

For a moment, I could only stare fearfully back at the gray-speckled tom before forcing a laugh and looking back down at my own flowers. "Nothing at all wrong with that..."

I then found myself almost frantically picking at the marigold

flowers now, keeping my head down as my paws practically shook. *Goodness, I don't think I've ever regretted doing something so quickly after actually doing it,* I thought anxiously. *Ugh, I hate that I did that! I knew that it was invasive and yet I did it anyway. And it clearly upset him.*

I then tilted my head, my eyebrows raising. *But it's enough for me to continue to suspect that something fishy is going on with him. I suppose it doesn't necessarily have to have to do with Squirrelflight, but it only adds to that potential narrative...*

I then flicked my ears, being pulled away from my thoughts once again as I actually heard Ashfur let out what sounded like an amused sniff.

I then looked up, both surprised and amused as Ashfur seemed to be struggling to gather all of his marigold. "Not only did Firestar not consider that we might not know what marigold is – we still might not..." he began, his voice actually full of laughter. "He also didn't consider the fact that we might struggle to carry all of it back."

I couldn't help but let out a relieved sigh at the tom lightening the mood – whether he had meant to or not. "He sure as heck did not!"

Then, as I began to attempt to gather my own marigold, I heard Ashfur and saw Ashfur continue to laugh out of the corner of my eye. "What?" I pressed to him.

Ashfur then attempted to speak as he collected several flowers in between his jaws. "Along with your softness, Thornclaw could also help you to get rid of that kittypet lingo of yours."

I let out a feigned gasp before bending down and biting into my own pile. "Oh, come on!" I meowed through a full mouth. I then lashed my tail in the direction of camp. "I'd hurry up before I toss my pile in your face!"

"I'm terrified," Ashfur muttered before pelting ahead of me, leading the way. "Come on, Lilypaw – there's no time to waste."

I gave a sharp nod before running ahead to catch up with the tom.

"Right behind you!"

Then, as I caught up and then slowed down my pace just a little, I couldn't help but stare contemplatively at Ashfur's gray-speckled pelt as I followed behind him. Though I certainly hadn't planned it, I'd learned a lot about one of my Clanmates today. What would I do with this information? Nothing at all, but it all left me incredibly intrigued.

Ashfur clearly wasn't a bad tom by any means, and this marigold expedition had actually been... fun? If Ashfur and I hadn't been considered acquainted before, we definitely were now.

However, there also was very clearly something going on with him and Squirrelflight – they had some sort of history that had occurred before I'd even arrived in the Clans – and it was something that affected the both of them negatively.

And after lots of thought, and reflecting on everything I'd seen up until this point, it seemed like it was something that the both of them, mainly Ashfur, seemed to struggle to cope with.

Author's Note

AHHHH! Victory! I have FINALLY finished this bonus scenes book!

First off, before I say anything else, I want to thank you all so much for supporting this book, and being so very patient with me as I became way less frequent with updating. After plowing through three full-length books just within a year and a half, it felt so strange to me to not update as often. But with life and so many college things happening, I just wasn't able to write as much as I would have liked to.

But I was SO thankful and excited whenever I was blessed with the time to! And more than that, my heart is filled with so much joy when I still see so many of you supporting this book and series despite my inconsistency. I'm so glad that so many of you are still so enthusiastic about this series and these characters. Seriously, thank you, and I still love doing this just as much, college is just a piece of poo (actually it's quite wonderful, it just keeps me from doing things like this!).

Anyway, as I was saying, I am so THRILLED that this book is finally done, and I am honestly so glad that I decided to create a book with this whole "bonus scene" concept, and it was actually REALLY nice and relieving for me to be able to fill in some empty spaces with my first arc, as well as set things up for the second one (hehehehe...).

I was seriously so enthusiastic and passionate about every single one of these bonus scenes, and I was so giddy writing and then publishing them, hehe! If you all had a favorite one, I definitely would love to know!

Hm... strangely, I feel like these author's notes at the end of my books are usually so sappy (well, it still was) and sad, because an era is ending, however, I'd argue that the end of this bonus scenes book is marking *the beginning of a new era*!!!! I very much emphasize the fact that this bonus scenes book helped set some things up for

the second arc ;)

And as excited as I am for the second arc, I'm not getting to it just yet! I've mentioned this before on my "Conversations" tab, but I plan on editing and finishing Mistpelt's Story before I create any more content (because that may or may not also set some things up for the second arc, hehehe). But once that is done, TO THE SECOND ARC WE GO!!!

Okay, whew, I think that's all that I have to say. If you read all of this, I love you and you are a trooper.

Again, thank you - yes, YOU - for supporting me and my stories. I give you a virtual hug and a cookie.

And as always,

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345